

That Photo Makes Me Hungry

Photographing Food
for Fun & Profit

Andrew Scrivani



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This book is dedicated to all of the women in my life who have made me a better artist, a better husband and father, and, most importantly, a better man.



Contents

Introduction

Chapter 1.

Seeing the Light

Chapter 2.

Decoding the Settings

Chapter 3.

Composing the Shot

Chapter 4.

Telling a Story

Chapter 5.

Making a Living

Conclusion: Deliverables

Acknowledgments

Index



Introduction

In the summer of 2002, I got a phone call from a photo editor at the *New York Times* Dining section, whom I had met through an old college friend. I had shot a few smaller news assignments over the past few months for her, and she needed an assignment shot at an ice cream shop in Staten Island, but could not find anyone willing to travel across the harbor. She asked if I knew Egger's Ice Cream Parlor. Of course I did. I grew up in Staten Island, and my friends and I used to ride our bikes there to get egg creams. Every kid who grew up on the North Shore of Staten Island would make the same pilgrimage at least a few times every summer.

This was my first food assignment for the *New York Times*, and even though I did not come from a food photography background, I wasn't nervous. All my editor needed was a couple of quick shots, but I played it like it was a cover story. I stalked around the shop like I owned the place. I asked to go behind the counter, in the back room, to stand on chairs or sit on the floor to get my shot. I directed the girl behind the counter to hold the ice cream a certain way and not to look at the camera. I acted the part of a *Times* photographer, and then I became one.

When the pictures were published the following week, I felt like a bucket list item had been checked off, but I had no real expectation that they would call me again. As it turned out, the Food editor, Sam Sifton, noticed my work and hired me again and again. After 17 years of assignments, I always remember his faith in me and try to honor that trust with every shot I take for the *New York Times*.

The lesson I learned and continue to share with photographers looking to get into the business is very simple: be confident, and when the door is open a crack, don't peek in—kick it down. The *New York Times* afforded me an opportunity and I was determined to make the most of that chance.

I tell you this not to boast about my own success, but because I am aware that many of you are looking to reinvent yourselves, and understanding that it's possible matters. I know there never seems to be enough time in the day, but when you are pursuing a dream, you will find the time. It will not feel like work.



Why Shoot Food?

People often ask me why I wanted to become a food photographer. It is a totally understandable question for somebody looking to learn about what I do or wondering if they have the “background” to embark on a career in the field themselves. My answer has remained pretty consistent, though perhaps a bit cryptic. My answer is: Sadie Milo.

Sadie Milo was my maternal great-grandmother, and the matriarch of my Sicilian family. Her real first name was Erselia, but everyone called her Mama. When I was a toddler, my parents moved into my grandparents’ home in the South Beach section of Staten Island. Sadie lived with her daughter—my grandmother—Annie, and she ruled the roost and the kitchen.

Sadie’s kitchen formed the emotional base that led me to food photography. The people, the lessons, and the love of food I experienced there were key to finding what would be my passion. I was drawn to my great-grandmother’s kitchen like a magnet. The stories of my drive to be in the kitchen are legendary and littered with broken bones, stitches, and burns. One afternoon in 1970, while my father napped after his overtime shift as a rookie cop, I slipped out the basement door and started up the stairs. There were cookies up them

there stairs, and Sadie could not have made it more clear that feeding them to me was her sanctified duty. I was only 18 months old and had no business on the stairs. My dad woke in a panic, not seeing me, and charged out the door and up the stairs. His intensity startled me and I fell, tumbling down a few steps before he caught me and we fell to the bottom together. Sadie cleaned my cuts and kissed my bumps—and of course fed me those cookies I was scaling the treacherous stairs for.

Sadie was a real inspiration to me, on so many levels. She really only knew one way to relate to children: to feed them. I watched her create an endless array of incredible meals. It started early in the morning, and her kitchen was alive with food and people until bedtime. The garden in the yard smelled rich with soil and basil and rosemary. The fridge was stocked with leftovers. There was always dessert. It was everything that classic food cultures, like that of the Southern Italians, have been made out to be in popular culture. It shaped the way I see food, what it means to me emotionally, and why I want to celebrate food the way I do.

I do not think that my food experience is unique by any means. Lots of people have their own Sadie. On the contrary, I believe that it is the commonality of those experiences that makes me successful at what I do. Many of us have food as a common language, a cultural reference, and a binding element in our lives and our upbringings. All I do is try to keep those feelings on the surface when I work. Sadie is my muse. I try to remember that whether I am telling a story about my food or yours, the emotional component of the stories is essentially the same.



My relationship with food, and particularly Italian food, has driven my desire to show how personal and intimate this work is for me. Taking these kinds of pictures has always been a way to share that story and bring the viewer into my world.



Some of my most vivid memories are of the garden at my grandmother's house and, in particular, the smell of the basil and the earth. The sun would hit that side of the house when Mama would cook, and I am sure that influences me when I shoot things like meatballs and sauce.

I encourage people getting started in food photography to tap into their emotional reservoir, their Sadie Milo, when creating food imagery. To try to be present and deliberate in telling the story. The more sensitive you can be to things like cultural cues in your plating, your propping, and the framing of your subjects, the more intimate the image becomes for the viewer. Food is intimate. Our relationship

with food is ongoing and ever-changing, but it forms the roots that anchor your style and your understanding of what kind of story you want to tell. The framework of our storytelling ability with food is our own shared histories.

I tell these stories to create a scaffolding for you. So you can understand just how ingrained the culture of the kitchen is in me and fully grasp just how driven I was to be around food. To show you the happiness it brought my family to watch me enjoy food, and to eventually show my own desire to feed people and make them happy too.

I believe it is essential for an artist to emotionally understand the core of what you are trying to bring to your audience. I am trying to recreate my connection to food and how it made me feel as a child. When people tell me that my pictures make them hungry, I feel like I did my job. When they tell me I accurately depicted their culture, I feel like I've done my duty. And when they say my pictures make them happy, I feel like an artist—because art is meant to make people feel something.



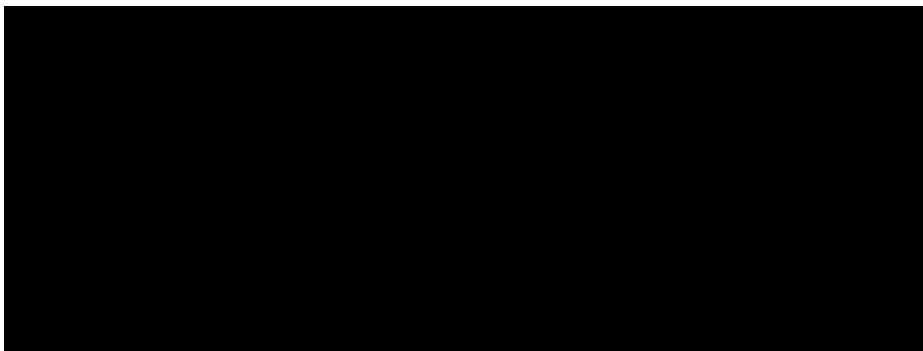
Including the implication of motion is a great way to infuse some realism into your composition. Here, a macro approach to a natural-looking lift with the chopsticks draws the viewer in.



This was a shoot for *Eating Well* magazine and we used the multiple round bowls and chopsticks to take a more graphic approach to complement some of the pictures in the article that were focused more on the food and less on the composition.



These Chicken Tinga Tacos were for a very special story I worked on for *Eating Well* magazine. I proposed a story about eating international food along the 7 subway line in Queens, New York. We met restaurateurs and remade their specialties in the studio. It was one of the most rewarding assignments I ever took part in.





The vibrancy of the peppers and scallions in this dish, also from the *Eating Well* subway story, popped so naturally in the black skillet. This is really indicative of the high contrast approach I try to use in a lot of my work.

Who Is this Book for?

This book came out of a class I've been teaching for the past several years. In 2012, I was asked by a relatively new online education startup, creativelive.com, to host a three-day food photography workshop. The logistics were terrifying. The format was akin to being on a live television show, six hours a day for three consecutive days, with a live audience and thousands of people watching online with the ability to write in questions or comments in real time.

The first wave of terror came when I was thinking of how to fill that many hours. I was really concerned that I would exhaust my expertise on day one and then be wandering around with my camera, live on the Internet, for the next two days. To the credit of my life-saving producer, Michael Karsh, nothing like that happened. Michael helped me craft a comprehensive outline for the course that really

answered the fundamental question: who is this course for? I would have to say that the outline we created and the course that followed became the skeleton for every minute of instruction I have done, on multiple platforms, ever since.

Michael helped me tease out that essential question about who makes up the audience and how best to serve those people. The substance of each course obviously depends on who I am trying to reach, but the template is always the same. So, after weeks of diving deep into the material, we found our answer as to who this course was for. And, after one day of filming, we had a name to attach to that person. Her name was Leigh.

Leigh was one of the students in the live audience at that first CreativeLive course. She sat to my right all three days, and she looked terrified.

As the course progressed, I became aware that Leigh was the only person in the group of 12 who had absolutely no experience with photography, styling, or any other aspect of the course. She was a blank slate, a control subject, in lab terms. If I could teach her this material, I could probably teach anyone.

As we progressed from lecture to practical assignments, I took care to put Leigh in situations she could succeed in and learn from. I partnered her with the more experienced students and occasionally made her my partner for demonstrations. She soaked it all up like a sponge and made remarkable progress during the three days on set. She looked more comfortable and became a little more confident each day. I counted her as my great success during this week and was thrilled at her progress.



Leigh Olson, once my student, has become a friend and a trusted colleague. She has assisted me on all of my work with Kate McDermott. The shot here and on the overleaf are from *Art of the Pie*.

What happened next is possibly my greatest triumph as a teacher. Leigh left that course and decided that she wanted to be a food photographer. She partnered with another woman from the class, Pam, and began to undertake personal food photography projects, learning the craft, practicing the things she learned in the course, jumping in with both feet. She had her husband build out their garage as a studio. She collected props. She assembled gear.

As of today, Leigh is a tried-and-true working food photographer. She has been my assistant on several cookbook projects. She has shot a few books of her own. She has her own studio and owns her own business, specializing in food visuals. I am awed at how far she has come. I know that I may have lit the fuse that sparked her interest in our field, but it was her diligence, passion, talent, and determination that brought her here.

If you see any part of yourself in Leigh, you have come to the right place.



These Pie Pops required no styling help. They came out of the oven and right onto the

shooting table.



The cover shot from *Art of the Pie* was not preplanned. The publisher chose this photo out of the general pool of shots we made. I retired these napkins after this shoot.

I am not going to get spiritual on you. When I say “seeing the light,” I am being very literal.

Chapter 1.

Seeing the Light

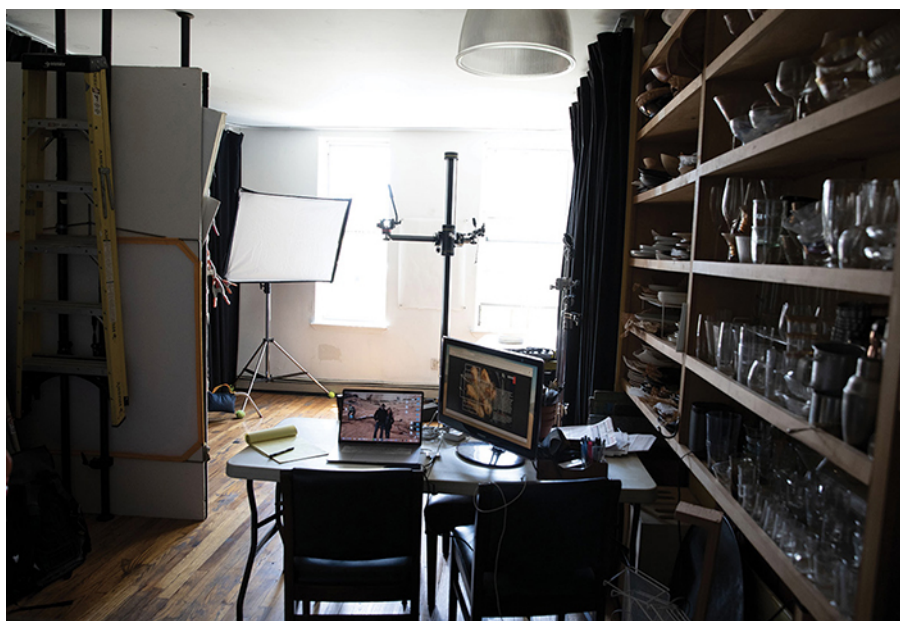


This is a great example of two particular things. First, make sure that your garnish is fresh and vibrant by soaking it in cold water until it's time to shoot. Secondly, by shooting against the light at a low angle, you can sometimes get the perfect amount of glisten coming off your subject. A little olive oil helps here, too.



Even with a darker composition, it is possible to achieve a dreamy or ethereal look by backlighting and using a wide open aperture.

There was a moment of recognition that occurred for me very early in my development as a food photographer, and it had to do with the light that naturally poured into the windows of the home studio space where I began shooting food. The windows faced southwest and, at certain times of year, provided beautiful, soft, indirect sunlight that was perfect for shooting food all day long. I took to calling it the Magic Window. A few years into shooting there, construction began on what promised to be a building that would block the light from that window. I began planning where I was going to move, once the light from the Magic Window was eclipsed. Then the construction workers suddenly switched gears and began to install a security wall directly behind us, instead. It was only 10 feet tall, and our apartment is on the third floor. Magic Window saved. The recognition of that particular kind of light allowed me to understand, stylistically, the importance of light in a space. It taught me to see the light.



The studio has also become as much a prop house as a shooting kitchen. The volume of things I have in the space has forced me to become very selective and constantly curate according to current trends.

I am not going to get spiritual on you. When I say “seeing the light,” I am being very literal. The first step in really understanding food photography is training your eye to recognize the quality of the

light around you before you actually look through a viewfinder. The lighting I use for food photography is based on a few simple principles. First, use a very big light source (i.e., the sun). Second, soften that light source. Third, craft and shape that light the way you want it to interact with your subject. These basic principles will be the way you learn to see the light and progress from using daylight to shaping artificial light to imitate natural light.



I tried to use light to create atmosphere and a sense of abstract beauty in the shape and color of these peppers. This photo is one I would use to teach those concepts in my workshops.



I never really liked the term “food porn,” but I think it is photos like these—ones that feel sensual and alluring—that helped popularize that language.

The Source

The sun is indeed the ideal key light for food photography. The sun is also a very unpredictable light source, one that needs to be mastered before moving into creating light that looks like the sun. Without getting too technical, let's talk about light temperature. In general terms, we discuss light in terms of warm and cool. Warm light is more orange/yellow in tint and cool light is more blue/green. We usually start there. Light temperature is officially measured using the Kelvin scale, and it is good to be familiar with how the numbers correspond to the general terms above.

To understand the Kelvin scale, think of the light bulb aisle at Home Depot. Though it may sound intimidating, “light temperature” is simply a way to describe the light appearance provided by a light bulb. The Kelvin scale is a standard used not just in photography but in any circumstance in which light is discussed in terms of its color.

When you buy a light bulb for your home, it is often described as warm or cool, once you have determined how dim or bright you'd like the light. These terms run counter to the Kelvin scale. Warm white light (WWL, also referred to as tungsten light) is called that because of the way it looks rather than because of its Kelvin temperature. WWL reads from 2800 to 3500 kelvins. Warm white light is terrible for food. Think of a restaurant at night.

Cool white light reads about 5000 to 6500 K, and is what we refer to as daylight balanced light. The butter zone for food is somewhere around 4800 to 5400 K. This is basically the color temperature of soft diffused daylight. You can test light temperature with your digital camera to further understand it. Take shots in different-colored light and look at the metadata in Photoshop to see what the native color temperature is in each shot. This will help you understand the relationship between the Kelvin scale and what color light you want to shoot in.

We also use color light meters to test color temperature on set. This is a rather expensive piece of equipment but very useful for calibrating light temperature.

In general, all foods will look better in the daylight range discussed

above, but stylistically understanding and using light temperature as a tool to tell stories with food will be essential to being a better food photographer. For example, in some compositions, the mood or tone of the room may be more important than actually making the food look its most delicious. A romantic, indoor dinner scene may be more reliant upon the feel of the event rather than the look of the food. In this case, a more tungsten light temperature would be better.



This Lobster Roll was shot during one of the first ever photo shoots for the website Gilt Taste. The use of the hand and the drip was an attempt to add a sense of action and movement. This is a rather complex composition, using both a human element and food movement in the same macro shot.





The subtleties of light temperature are exemplified here, with the shot of the Raspberry Tart (around 5000K), the middle shot of the Shakshuka (at around 4800), and finally the Eggs with Courgettes (at 4650).



Chocolate is one of the hardest but ultimately most rewarding subjects when you get it right. It may seem counterintuitive to shoot a dark subject in a dark environment but the lighter-colored cake being side-lit provided just enough contrast to allow the chocolate to stand out in a very romantic way.

The Softening

Harsh, bright sunlight is very difficult to calibrate photographically and is not at all flattering to food. A version of this approach is en vogue these days, yet it is not exactly a full-on light assault on your plate. A harder light approach with heavy drop shadowing, which look like dark shadows at the edges of your subject, and light artifacts, which are sometimes crisscrossing beams of bright light hitting your table—prism shadows and dappled sunlight are bit of a craze at the moment. I can fully appreciate why this is happening, but in my opinion, it's an approach that often takes us further away from the mission of most food photography projects.

From an artistic perspective, this trend is a valid approach to broadening the visual techniques applied to food. It looks like fine art still life and is compositionally appealing. What it fails to recognize is that hard light usually does not make food look delicious or romantic . . . and that is exactly the goal of good food photography. It also takes away the balance of light and shadow for close-up or macro photography by overlighting the food for the sake of the whole composition. We should not lose sight of the fact that at the end of the day, we are still trying to do those things well. This approach will not make its way to many commercial applications for this very reason. Arty is all well and good until you get to the commercial world, in which making people hungry is the primary goal. If our collective goal is to make food look delicious, then understanding certain techniques to do just that is essential.



This is one of my first attempts at an unfiltered light approach for publication. I had experimented with this technique for a while before I started to find subjects that worked under harsh light. The reason this works is because the grapefruit stood up to straight sunlight without becoming washed out. Instead, the shimmer of the sun on the fruit and the deep shadow work to complement one another.



Meat sometimes presents a challenge in capturing exactly what they are. The inclusion of the bone in this shot is subtle but it gets the message across that it's a steak and not another type of meat.



The lighting for this Cream Puff seems soft but it's not diffused. It's actually just outside a direct light source and benefits from the ambient light cast into the shadowed part of a very large studio.



Sometimes the abstract beauty of something like these waves of chocolate icing with flecks of sea salt transcends the subject itself to become interesting beyond being desirable as food. When it works on both levels, it can really become an iconic image. My teenage niece made this her screensaver.

We have been told for a long time that lighting your food with a camera-mounted flash is one of the major no-no's of food photography. The reason for this is that pictures will have hot spots that look like bright white areas on your subject; they will also lack depth and look generally unappetizing. Even though most camera-mounted flashes are close to the right color temperature for food, they are providing light from the wrong angle. We try not to shoot food from the same angle that the light is coming from, and camera-

mounted flashes do just that. So let this be your final warning.

Ideally, you need soft filtered light for shooting food. When I refer to “diffusing” or “softening” light, I simply mean shining light through something translucent to make the light less harsh. Soft filtered daylight is my preference. One of the best solutions is a bit counterintuitive: Cloudy days are great for food photography.



Recognizing when a subject does not need anything but a great frame and good lighting to be a stand out image is part of being a good photographer. Your eyes will tell you when all you need to do is pull the shutter.

When I taught my very first food photography workshop in Seattle in 2012, the host of the event kept warning me that we might not have enough light for the demonstrations I planned. I told her that adversity was part of the job and that I planned to use this as a key teaching point for my class. She was dubious and asked if I had ever shot in Seattle before. I said that I had not.

The day of the class came and, of course, it was raining. The room we were in had southern exposure, a favorite of food photographers. We like both northern and southern exposure because the light stays mainly indirect and often appears softer indoors. The Seattle photographers in the class were all worried about the cloudy day, and when I told them that they were the luckiest food photographers in the world, they thought I was crazy. We were shooting a wide range of foods, from pasta to brownies to desserts like pavlovas, which are very light. We had a great opportunity with so many different foods to

experiment with and see how that wonderful light played on each one. That light did not disappoint, and we had a fantastic lesson.



If you pay close attention to many of the pictures I make with hands, you will notice that they are the same male hands. They happen to be mine. Once my setup is ready, using a monitor allows me to be in the picture and signal to my assistant when I want the picture taken.



The direct sun approach that can create really fun shadows that we call “light artifacts” when using clear glass bowls and glasses.



Shooting outdoors gave me an opportunity to play with the technique of using very hard, unfiltered light on a subject, like dark meats, which can handle that much direct sun because they can easily fall into shadow in lower light.

I went on to teach and show them how, because of their cloudy days, their light was already naturally soft and hovering at or around 4800 K (better known as the ideal color temperature for food photography). I brought them to the windows, adjusted their camera settings for them, and then they were on their way. I am happy to say that, out of that first group of workshop attendees, four are now published cookbook authors and another four are working professional food photographers.

When not in Seattle, I have used white picnic umbrellas and sheets, tents, and dappled tree shade to make outdoor pictures softer in bright sunlight. More commonly, I use light-filtering discs or silks and frames that you can buy at the photo store to provide balanced, beautiful light. I will also often look to find a shady spot and use the shade to make the light less harsh outdoors.



This is one of the images I made while shooting Kris Carr's *Crazy Sexy Kitchen* in Woodstock, New York. We shot most of the book outdoors under cloudy skies in March. It was cold, but the light was perfectly diffused.



I was invited to this outdoor dinner party in Claryville, New York, and I did not know what the setting would be like. Once I saw where the party was located, I drove back to the house and got my camera gear and made an entire set of images of the day.

When I want to “bounce” light, what I am doing is reflecting it. Some photographers use highly reflective surfaces like mirrors to bounce light, but when you want a softer approach, using solid white surfaces like poster board or heavy white paper works even better. Conversely, if I want to “deaden” or “neg” the light in a shot, I may add a darker, nonreflective surface to my set to create more shade.

Remember, though: The bigger your subject, the harder it is to create a shady environment on your set. Whole picnic tables or barbecue scenes may be better left to sunset, when the soft romantic light provided by the sun just above the horizon needs no filtering.

The color temperature may need some adjusting, but the beauty of late afternoon light can make food look amazing.

The Shaping

Now that your light is sufficiently softened, you will also need to understand that sometimes the light isn’t exactly where you want it on your subject. This is where shaping the light you have harnessed becomes essential to making the shot you want. You will need some tools to do this, and not all of them need to be very expensive. Actually, most of them are pretty cheap. With some foam core poster board, aluminum foil, card stock in both black and white, and a few A-clamps, you have most of what you’ll need to get started. Other items, like small mirrors and shocks of cloth, can also be helpful.

All of the items listed above will be used to two ends: to either push light onto your subject or take light away from your subject. That’s all. So here is the scenario:

I have a pile of brownies on my table, and I want to backlight them to give the composition a dramatic, airy look. My background will be blown-out white highlights, achieved by putting some opalescent

diffusion material in my window during high sun. I place my brownies on the table and compose my shot. I set my camera and take a test shot to see if my settings are ok. It is a delicate composition because I am playing with a very dark subject against a very bright background. The hazard is that in order to get the right exposure for the blown-out background, I will lose light on my dark subject. This is exactly the case. So I adjust for the exposure I want for the highlights and attempt to “add light” to the front of my frame on the dark subject. I do this by putting two small (4” × 6”) pieces of white card stock on the table, opposite the light, shining the light back onto my subject. I use the A-clamps to make the card stock stand upright.

This works, but it lacks the drama I want, so I decide to cover one of the pieces of card stock with a sheet of foil, therefore bouncing the light much harder from one side than the other. I like this effect, but I want it to be even more dramatic, so I remove the A-clamp with the remaining white card, leaving only the foil-covered card. Now, I have a bright side and a dark side on my subject. Pretty dramatic, but I want to go further. I want the dark side to really be dark, darker than room tone alone will allow. I bring back the other A-clamp, but this time it has a piece of black cardstock to truly deaden the light on that side of the subject, and now it’s really dramatic—exactly what I wanted.

If you understand what I was doing in this example, then you can apply the same techniques—big or small—to any composition. Adding and subtracting light to any subject is exactly the same technique. Push light in. Take it away. Add a brighter highlight. Add a darker shadow. These are the basic principles of crafting your light, and once you understand these guidelines, lighting any subject with any light source becomes possible. The rest depends on your creative style and preferences.





Silver card/no card



Silver card/white card



Silver card/black card



White card/black card

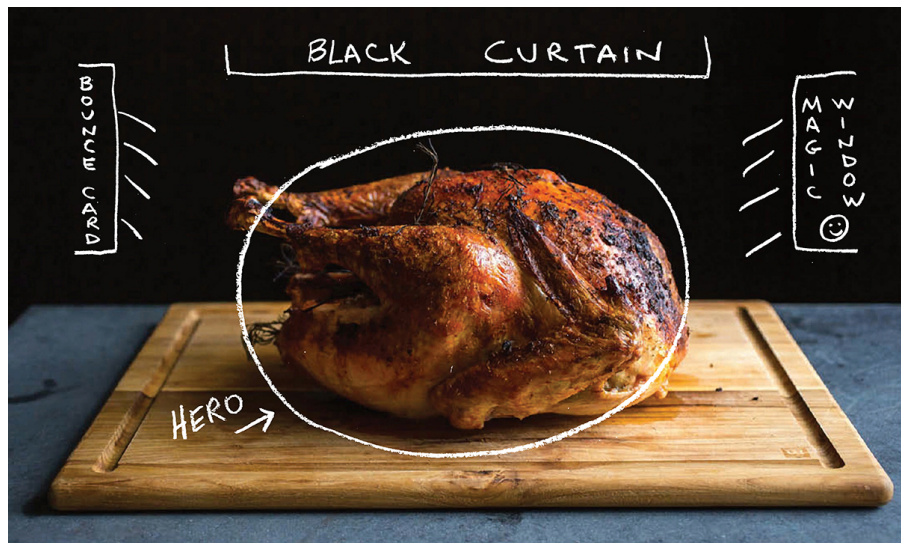


White card/no card



White card/white card







Having a distinct style that you can fall back on is helpful when the subject is either not very attractive or hard to define. This picture became an exercise in using good props, interesting light, and a dramatic setting to overcome an ill-defined subject.

Finding Your Lighting Style

I would have to say that my lighting style has been both the most defining aspect of my work and the thing that has caused me the most consternation.

From the very beginning of my career, I was drawn to a darker, moodier style of lighting—some would call it “painterly.” My main influence was pretty clear: the Dutch masters’ still life paintings I saw in museums. I felt that they really romanticized food, and that was the way I wanted to tell food stories.

I did not come from a food photography background; there were very few natural light photographers who self-identified as “food photographers” back in the early 2000s. Most of them were shooting strobe and preferred to be called still life photographers. There was Quentin Bacon and Gourmet photographer Romulo Yanes, both of whom I admired. I saw some of my own emerging style in their work. But my work was still darker and more “masculine,” as I was being told by editors. I stuck to my guns because I felt that if I was able to form a style around what I saw as a “traditional” approach to food imagery, eventually people would see what I was seeing.

Light has the ability, all by itself, to alter the mood and set the tone of any situation. We are all aware of and react to light in very primal ways. Considering the way you light your subjects with that in mind will serve you very well as you craft your style of photography.

Some of the things I have noticed regarding trends and groupings of particular genres, when it comes to lighting, are pretty distinct. The health and wellness space is light and bright and happy, and the light is very full with ample fill and little mood or shape to the light at all. This style dominated women’s magazines for much of the early 2000s and continued into the blog spaces of the food writers/photographers. It continues to appear in the social media feeds of many of the top people in that space today.

Another trend that is coming to an end, much to my dismay, is that of my own personal style: moodier compositions with shadows crafted with large, softened directional light sources. Many of the major food magazines were employing this style with darker surfaces and propping as a way to separate themselves from the health space for many years. Recently, the trend is something I have had some trouble

squaring with making food look delicious. Many publications are favoring direct, hard, unfiltered light that produces deep drop shadows, dramatic artifacts, and refracted light through glass and liquids. It is clearly another attempt to invent or discover “a look,” but in my opinion it has strayed in a fine art direction that ignores the main objective of food photography: to make food look desirable. It did present a good challenge for me as I attempted to meet the trend with my own style and at my own comfort level and have made some compositions recently of which I am very proud.



One of the main reasons my go-to setup is the side-lit, dark black background is that it is the best way to create contrast to capture steam and smoke rising off of food.

Lighting has the ability to shape how we feel, to imply season or time of day, and, most importantly, to convey the intention of the photographer as to what story she wants to tell. It is an essential aspect of determining both the individual image and the overall style for which a photographer wants to be known. Many times, a client will hire a photographer more for the way they light than the way they compose. Understanding what your intentions are and how you can use light to tell your story visually is the first step.



This picture is truly inspired by the classic still life paintings of the Dutch Masters, which I always associated with food imagery. My style is derived from that influence and this image is an homage to where those painting led me creatively.



Iconic food items, like these English Muffins, bring back memories for many people. For me, it was the way the semolina flour would spill out when you took the muffins out of the packaging. I tried to include that in these pictures to tap into that memory.



Similarly, waffles seem to always need syrup or butter—or both!—to capture the nostalgia of a classic breakfast. Small elements like these are meant not only to make the pictures visual but also to evoke memories and familiarity.

Camera settings should not be the biggest obstacle to learning how to take the pictures you want.

Chapter 2.

Decoding the Settings

I am often asked by friends and students about which camera to use for food photography. Which camera is the “best” is always very subjective, and it’s based on need, budget, and ability. What’s best for you may be very different than what’s best for someone else. But no matter what camera you use, to get the most out of it, you need to understand the settings.

I met my friend and cookbook collaborator Kate McDermott in Seattle in 2012, when I was teaching my first full-fledged workshop at the home of a local blogger. She was not there as a workshop attendee but as a representative of a shellfish company. She brought clams, oysters, and a world-class shucker to the workshop for our students to photograph. Kate and I hit it off immediately. In the fall of 2015, Kate excitedly texted me about her new camera arriving—a camera that I helped her pick out and accessorize. It was a Fuji mirrorless DSLR, Kate’s first DSLR camera. She admitted to being nervous about just taking it out of the box. I talked her off the ledge, and she opened the box so we could go through the setup.

Throughout this process, Kate and I were joking about how she was acting like she was going on a first date with her new camera. My conversations with Kate often stray into literary narratives—our minds create improvisational scenes and stories around our dialogue. This time, the dating narrative took off as she was thinking of how to name her new camera. She decided on Otto.

The name Otto is of course was derived from the word *auto*—the setting on the camera where Kate felt most comfortable starting her relationship.

I have long been preaching to my students that in order to fully understand the craft of photography, you must get out of auto mode and eventually learn to manually operate the camera. Auto mode is a crutch and will hamper your development as a photographer.

So Otto, of course, was a joke aimed at me, and I ran with it. I pushed back at Kate, saying that a relationship with Otto was safe. That Otto was the kind of relationship that felt comfortable and familiar but lacked excitement. That Otto would never let her reach her full potential, challenge her, and make her brim with passion whenever she was with him. Otto was a bore.

Kate ran around with Otto for a while, but soon started to want more. She needed more depth to her relationship. Then she found a new camera crush—we called him Avi. Avi was the the AV setting of

her camera. It is what is called the Aperture Priority mode. Avi offered her the opportunity to set the aperture of her camera while the remaining settings were set automatically. It was a step up from Otto, but still pretty safe. Avi offered her some depth and control, and being with him felt like progress. Like a more mature experience. He opened the door for her, but alas, Avi was just a fling.

Kate's next camera beau, whom we called Manuel, represented everything she wanted in this relationship. Excitement, creativity, energy, flexibility, and understanding. Kate was finally grasping how to use her camera in manual mode, and gaining the confidence to shoot with full control over her shutter speed, ISO, and aperture. It's a big step for any new photographer.

It may seem a little corny, but joking around about Otto, Avi, and Manuel was a fun way to help Kate ease the apprehension she had about learning something as intimidating as a new piece of complicated technology. By relating it to familiar emotions, she made it seem less foreign and scary.

Camera settings should not be the biggest obstacle to learning how to take the pictures you want. Aperture, shutter speed, ISO, white balance, buttons, switches, and dials all seem to baffle most of us at first, making that auto setting so enticing. It is not as hard as you think, and it is essential to becoming a proficient photographer. All you right-brained artistic types, fear not: The math of photography is not as hard as that ninth-grade algebra class. Thank goodness.

Here are four settings to consider when you put your camera into manual mode to shoot food. I will go into more detail on the following pages.



1. Iso
2. Aperture
3. Shutter Speed
4. White Balance

1. ISO

Set your ISO to the lighting conditions around you.

VIEWVOW
LIGHT
1500-16000

One of the ways I found it easier to understand ISO when learning photography was to think about disposable cameras. The ones for outdoors or bright light were marked with lower numbers, like 100, and for indoors or lower light settings there were higher numbers. Back in the film era, ISO referred to film speed, and it is still referred to in those terms.

For food, you want sharp detail shots, and the lower the ISO, the crisper the image. As the ISO setting gets higher, the sharpness of the shot decreases. The rule of thumb was that the more you spent on your camera, the better your pictures would be at high ISO ratings.

This is not as true anymore, but some cameras perform better than others at high ISO ratings, and if you anticipate shooting in low light, then buy a camera that does well in those conditions.

For example, there are many times I take very close (macro) shots of fruits and vegetables. I like to capture very intricate details, like the bumps in citrus skin or the veins in a leaf of kale. If I don't have super-sharp details in the file, then the dramatic effect of that shot is minimized. With a lower ISO, the pixels will be "tighter" (closer together), and we will get less "digital noise" in the image.



I often tell people that I started shooting extreme macro shots pretty early in my career because I felt that composing and framing was easier once I filled the frame with food. I also really like the abstract nature of close-up imagery.

2. Aperture

Set your aperture with your eyes in mind. If you understand that your pupil gets smaller in bright light and bigger in darkness, then you already understand aperture. You also know that your focus, or depth of field, will get more shallow as your pupil (or aperture) gets larger. This can be a useful technique for food photography, because by using a more open aperture, you can have what is called selective focus and concentrate on a specific part of the subject. The trend in the early days of food photography really centered around this idea. We would style the food with one very prominent element, like a chile flake or a chocolate chip on a cookie, focus on that element, and let the rest of the image fall out of focus. This was as much stylistically as technologically driven. This technique became popular mainly because, when shooting in daylight with a first- or second-generation digital camera, you needed to shoot with a wide-open aperture to compensate for the poor low light performance of the cameras. Basically, it was a style that allowed as much light into the camera as possible at higher ISO ratings.

So why is aperture always so confusing? Because aperture has an inverse relationship to the numbers on the camera. Smaller numbers (i.e., 2.8, 1.4) mean bigger aperture, and bigger numbers (i.e., 8.0, 11) mean smaller.



This is a good example of selective focus using a shallow aperture. The bartender is clearly a major element, but, by focusing on the drink, the photo makes it obvious that the drink is the star. If this were a story about the bartender, then the opposite would be true.

3. Shutter Speed

If aperture has a relationship to the pupil of your eye, then shutter speed relates to your eyelids—how fast you blink your eyes. The faster the shutter, the easier it is to freeze the action when holding the camera in your hand. Shutter speeds will have a direct relationship to your ISO and aperture numbers. With food photography, which is

essentially still life, trying to get the shutter at a 1/125th of a second or above will allow you to hold the camera without shake or motion blur and will eliminate the need for a tripod. For example, the morning light in my studio usually measures at a 1/125th of a second, at an aperture of 4.0 and 100 ISO. This is my starting point, and I do not push any of those numbers to achieve my style without a tripod. As your ISO gets higher, so will your shutter speed (keeping a constant aperture setting).

I like to move around the table and shoot handheld from many angles. Being able to shoot at higher shutter speeds and maintain my other settings is essential to my workflow. Cameras that can accommodate this style give me the ability to prioritize the need for faster shutter speeds for handheld camera work.



The scallions in this shot were only a garnish, but, because I hand-hold the camera and move around the table, I sometimes see things to shoot that are not the focus of the story but add something visually to the package. Adjusting for faster shutters allows me to do this.



This is from *Art of the Pie* and these are Kate's hands. I chose to focus on her hands and allow the flour to suffer some motion blur because my shutter was too slow to freeze the action of the flour. This was an intentional choice based on the lighting conditions and the image worked as a result.

4. White Balance

White balance is, put simply, the color or temperature of the light you are shooting. Refer back to the section on the Kelvin scale and light temperature for a refresher. Digital photography made white balance much easier than ever before. Since going digital, and particularly

since the invention of the RAW file format, I now set my camera to auto white balance and then make my white balance corrections in Photoshop. As noted earlier, daylight ranges from 4800 to 5500 K and is considered good light for food. When your image is cooler or bluer, you need to raise the number closer to 5500 K, and when it is warmer, or more red/orange, you need to lower the number toward 4800 K. So, when shooting food, your white balance range is very frequently at the lower end of those numbers because you are aiming for softer daylight.



The white balance adjustment for these cookies was very tricky because the room light was

reading warmer than what I normally like. The white paper and brown cookies were playing off one another and creating a warmer tone.

Count & Click

When I first learned about the relationships between ISO, shutter speed, and aperture, I learned what some people call the count-and-click method. I recommend you sit with your camera while reading this. It will make more sense if you can make the adjustments along with me.

For example, if my settings are as follows:



ISO 100 1/125 SEC F4.0

I want to adjust because the room just got darker, but I do not want to change the shutter speed or aperture. This is so I can hand-hold the camera without too much camera shake or motion blur. I can get three stops brighter by counting forward three clicks on my ISO, to 200. This should brighten my image considerably. Maybe it's a little too bright. In that case, I want to adjust the shutter speed, so as not to change the depth of field of my shot . . . so I'll count forward one click on my shutter speed, to 160. Now my image is exactly where I want it.



ISO 200 1/160 SEC F4.0

But now I am moving to an overhead shot and want to adjust my aperture to 8.0. That's quite a few clicks, so I count: 4.5, 5.0, 5.6, 6.3, 7.1, 8.0. Six clicks forward on my aperture means six clicks backward on either my shutter speed or my ISO. I am using my tripod, so I am not concerned with camera shake. This leads me to take my six clicks backward on my shutter speed from 160 to 125, 100, 80, 60, 50, 40. Now I have the same exact exposure as I had previously, at these new settings.



ISO 200 1/40 SEC F8.0

But maybe I don't want to be on the tripod, and I want to hand-hold the camera but keep the same aperture and exposure. In that case, I would change my ISO again and adjust the shutter speed back to 1/125th of a second. At these settings, I made a six-click adjustment to my aperture to get from 4.0 to 8.0, so I need six clicks to keep this setting. I adjust the ISO one click from 200 to 250 and my shutter speed five clicks from 40 to 50, 60, 80, 100, 125. I combined the two settings to get six clicks, and now I have the same exposure in a way that allows me to hand-hold the camera.



ISO 250 1/125 SEC F8.0

This is how you use the count-and-click method. As long as you understand what each setting does and which direction makes it brighter or darker, you will always know how to adjust on the fly without changing your creative approach to the shot.

When setting your camera for outdoor shooting, particularly on very bright days, remember to always use the lowest ISO setting your camera has, typically around 100. You may also need to employ neutral density filters to achieve the shallow apertures we like in food photography.

For camera novices who do not feel ready for manual shooting yet, the AV (or aperture priority) mode is a way to have a little more control over your image, rather than strictly relying on the auto mode. It will also help you begin to understand the relationships I explained above. Just set the aperture and ISO you would like, and shoot away. The shutter will be on auto.

What Is in My Bag?

I want to preface this section with something I feel very strongly about when it comes to gear. I am a gearhead, and I love to play with as many gadgets and things as I can get my hands on, but that does

not make me a better photographer. It's been said that the best camera you have is the one you have on you. If that is your phone, then make the best picture you can with that. I don't carry professional camera equipment on vacation, and I do just fine with my phone and a small mirrorless camera, which is like a hybrid of a point-and-shoot and a DSLR. Good photography practices will translate to any camera that you know well and understand how to use.

There are many factors that drive the choices we make when it comes to equipment. Obviously, one of the primary factors is budget. Camera equipment is far from cheap, and now that we almost exclusively shoot digital, the need to upgrade your gear fairly regularly, once you are a working professional, is pretty intense. I upgrade my camera bodies roughly once every two to three years. I do it so often because I am trying to upgrade before my old bodies lose too much value. I usually time the upgrade so that it occurs right before new models are due to hit the market, and this has been a good practice. I would suggest investing in gear that is a bit outside of what your jobs will support. I overextended myself on gear early in my career because it helped the work. I continue to invest in what's in my bag because it has always served me well. Making sacrifices that help my next steps as a photographer have always paid dividends.

I shoot primarily Canon bodies, and currently I have two 5D Mark IV bodies. I also shoot Sony Alpha bodies and have an a7S as well. I use both Canon L series and Zeiss lenses. The one lens I own that I feature heavily in my work is a Canon 50mm macro lens. It is the smallest, lightest, cheapest, and flimsiest lens I own, it has been discontinued by Canon . . . and I absolutely love it. I fell in love with shooting macro lenses very early in my career and have continued to use them to this day. I also own a Zeiss 50mm macro lens that is terrific, but it's a manual focus lens and does not always lend itself to my workflow, which often relies on overhead shots. I shoot a Canon L 100mm macro for extreme close-ups, and I have a collection of other L lenses for lifestyle and video work: 35, 50, 16-35, 24-70 and 70-200. Most of these are the fastest lenses for their focal length, except the 16-35, which is a 4.0. When I use the term *fast*, it refers to how open the aperture will get, thus allowing you to shoot at faster shutter speeds. I usually travel with my light meter; a tripod with a pan, a tilt head, and a cross arm for overheads; a trigger release; rolls of diffusion material; white and black cards; and plenty of both CF and SD media cards and spare batteries. That is basically it. For food shoots, I find that keeping my bag stocked only with what I know I

will use is the best way to go. I carry a Leatherman multitool as well, but I have had half a dozen of them taken away at airports because I always forget they're in my bag. Good to have, nonetheless.



The food is lit and your camera is set, the final step before snapping the shutter is composing the shot.

Chapter 3.

Composing the Shot



The basics of shape, color, and negative space, particularly in macro food photography, help inform our compositions just as much as the subject and the need to make it look delicious.

We often hear that photography is about composition, but what exactly does that mean? Mostly, it refers to what we call a photographer's eye: how she sees her shots and fills the viewfinder before pulling the shutter. It could be seen as the way a photographer walks around and sees the world. To me, especially concerning food photography, it is about those things—and also about what goes into getting your subjects ready to exist inside your perfect composition. Still life is not observation so much as it is construction. I like to say that preparing food for diners and for the camera are very different, and it's on the photographer to know and manage the difference. To construct an image from scratch and to be able to shoot a beautiful dish that comes out of a restaurant kitchen are both compositions that I would like to help you master.

In this chapter, I will discuss some of the food styling techniques every food photographer should be aware of and practice consistently. The more you understand and interact with your subject, the better you will know how to compose it. I will also discuss what the assembly of both your set and your plate should look like before you make a shot. Another thing I will implore you to do is have your own basic styling kit in your photo bag, so you can expertly “re-pose” your subjects like a pro. Don't worry if the chef gets mad—it's your name on the picture.

Once you have your subject exactly where you want it, the next step is understanding your frame. Knowing both what you want to put into your shot and how you want to fill your frame is what will set you apart from your peers. Planning is the key. In this chapter, I will help you learn and understand your frame at different focal lengths and show you how to maximize the use of different aspect ratios on multiple platforms. Your gear should influence your style, not dictate it. Frame with what you have.

We will also discuss what I have come to understand as “table geometry,” to express how to get the most out of each set-up from many different shooting angles. Finally, I will take you inside my studio to show you the tools I use to make my images beautiful, consistent, evocative, and memorable. The way my studio is set up represents how I like to work and what will give me the best chance at success. You should set your space up in a way that will help you do the same.

	Rules	Styling starts at the market.		Blue plates are a no-no—it's psychology.	
	Keep your greens hydrated and fresh.	to	Plate on smaller dishes.	Style	Keep it loose but not sloppy.
Neutral colors let the food be the star.		If props don't make sense, don't use them.	By	Know your utensils (for example, Thai food does not use chopsticks!).	

Food Styling 101

The most important part of the shot composition, obviously, is the food that you're shooting.

Always remember that we are preparing food for the camera, and not to necessarily to be eaten, although that is the preference. Whenever possible, we want to keep the food edible, but when you have to choose between delicious or delicious-looking, you must default to the latter.

One of the most prominent techniques is the decision to undercook some foods slightly. Many foods begin to shrink, swell, discolor, fade, and soften when cooked to eat. In food photography, striving for optimal color and shape of the food while maintaining the illusion that it is fully cooked is a real art. For example, Thanksgiving turkey. Have you ever noticed that your turkey never appears like the perfect-looking birds on the cover of every October food magazine? There is one simple reason for that . . . it is most likely radically undercooked, and the skin is tanned with a heat gun to get the perfect tone (as seen on pages [52–53](#)). This is necessary because once the turkey is fully cooked, the flesh shrinks and loses its plumpness, and evenly cooking a bird so that the skin is perfectly brown all over is virtually impossible.



Getting the perfect color on a roast or other fleshy meats often requires tools and techniques that help achieve that color after it comes out of the oven, like torches, heat guns, and sometimes even a hair dryer.

Another basic tip for working with complex foods like things that have sauces, dressings, or multiple components is to individually select each part and then carefully assemble the plate with all of the elements gently put together. For example, any salad I shoot usually deviates from the instructions in the recipe that say to put everything in the bowl and toss to combine. This is an eating technique, not a shooting one. For photography, I would build the salad (most of which has been hand-selected and rested in bowls of ice water for freshness) piece by piece and then carefully add the dressing at the end, one spoonful at a time. For pasta, slightly undercook it, then drain and splash with cold water, then coat in oil and leave on a sheet pan to cool. Add sauces later.



Salads may be cold and require less preparation, but they are among the hardest things to style and shoot well.

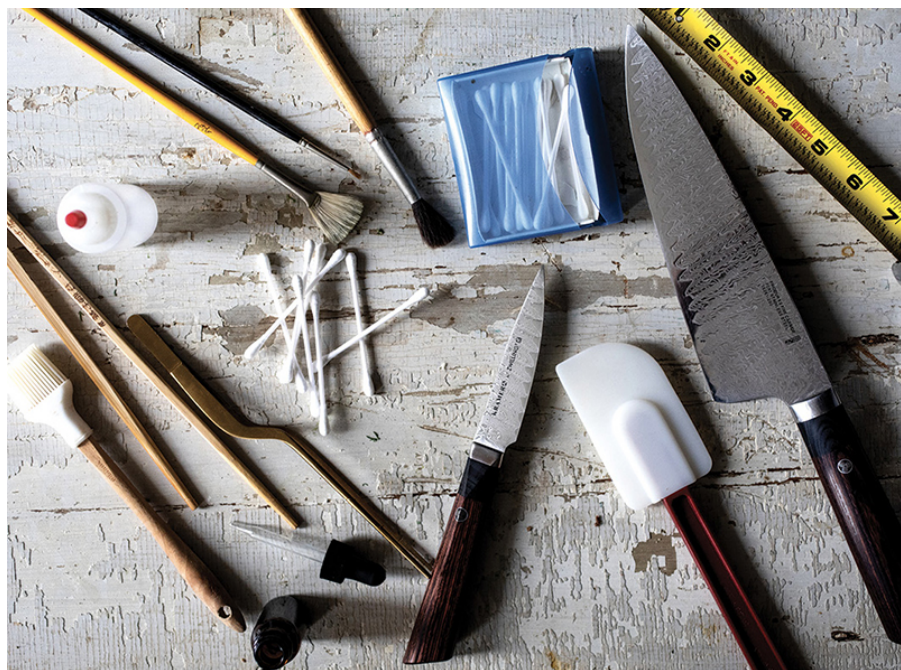


The prop and food styling choices we make have to work without becoming too “on the nose.” The surface, cups, and additional garnishes all play a role to make this feel like a natural (not forced) nod to the Indian heritage of the recipe.



I always tried to approach my work in a cinematic way, even long before I became a filmmaker. Implied action, even in a still frame, helps the viewer anticipate of the narrative.

One other thing anyone working on food visuals should have is a basic tool kit. My kit includes several sets of tweezers and chopsticks for moving small items onto and off of the plate. It also includes a few spray bottles and eye droppers for adding mist or droplets to the composition. I have gotten pretty proficient with an array of heating elements, like blow torches and heat guns, to add the perfect amount of char or browning to dishes like meats or broiled or barbecued foods. A few small paint and pastry brushes should be included, to add that perfect streak of moisture to a shot and to brush away that one errant crumb from the frame. Cotton swabs and paper towels should always be handy, too, in case you need to clean the edge of the bowl or take away a smudge with surgical precision. You should also have your own set of knives and basic kitchen tools that you are comfortable using, as well as a travel case to bring them in on every shoot.



My tweezers and chopsticks come in handy when I have a lot of ingredients or garnishes on a dish or a drink. I use them to move those things around carefully to achieve a better balance in the image, as you can see in the pictures opposite.

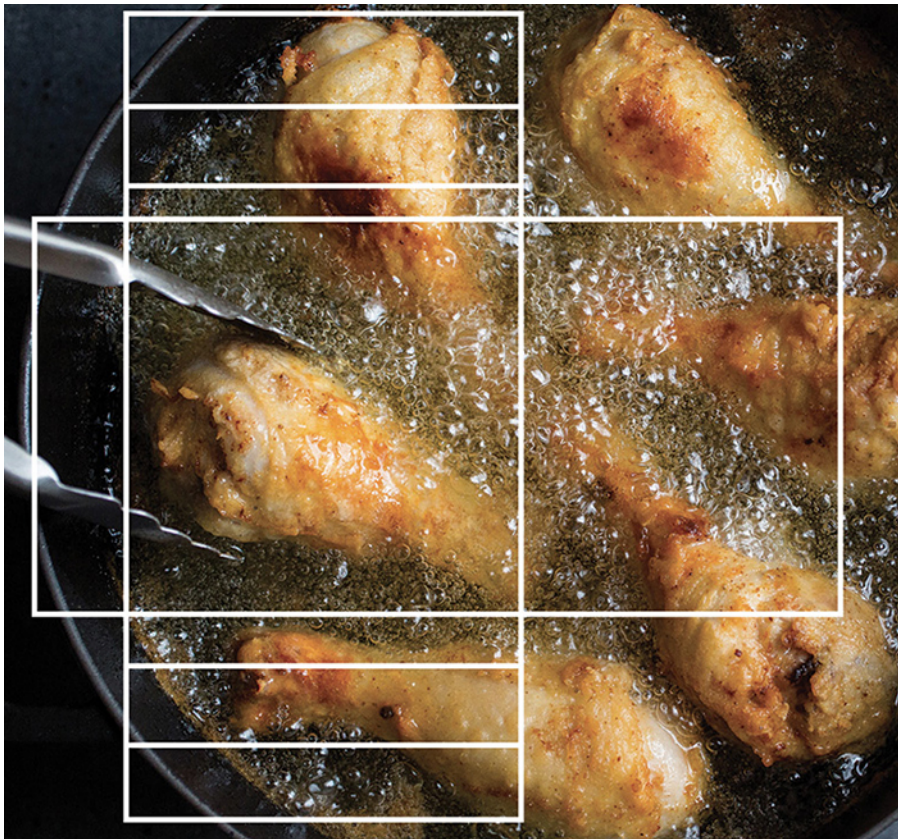


Framing

Traditionally, if I were your photography professor in college, we would start with the rule of thirds and go from there. Because I am not your professor, and I do not want to venture into a technical discussion, I will leave the concept of the rule of thirds to the professors. But basically you want to train yourself to understand that you do not have to—nor should you—center your subject in the middle of your frame in every picture you take. It is completely appropriate and acceptable in some cases to do that very thing, but in order to grow as a visual artist, you must understand and appreciate that you can use the entire frame to tell your story.

In food photography, we have a distinct advantage when it comes to using our entire frame—it's the exact same shape as our palette. Most tabletop surfaces we work on are rectangular, with an aspect ratio very similar to that of a 35mm frame. The tabletops in my studio are by and large 2×3 , which is the exact same ratio as most of my frames (4×6). So if you mount your camera directly over your tabletop, you can experiment with filling that frame compositionally very easily. Once you begin to maximize the use of your entire frame in that way, the idea that all the real estate in your shot is valuable is profound. I know square photos have become very popular online, but for our purposes, we should consider the rectangular frame the standard and work from there.

Very recently, I needed to prepare a treatment for a major fast food outlet and show them how I could utilize one frame in up to six different aspect ratios for display on multiple electronic devices. It was a perfect example of how knowing and understanding how to use my entire frame and cropping into different ratios did not fundamentally change the thesis of my composition. Obviously, this poses problems when you don't have enough real estate to accomplish the goal in some frames, but what I am getting at is that being able to tell the same story with more or less frame to work with should be possible. If you train yourself to see more than just a center-framed subject on a particular focal length in a specific aspect ratio, you will be prepared to tell your story in any frame you are required to work with.



I was trying to show an agency how I would frame for multiple aspect ratios, and I included this shot in a director's treatment for a KFC campaign.

The first time I realized that I didn't really know my frame was in the mid-2000s, when we started to shoot the *New York Times* Recipes for Health column for the web. Until then I had only shot for magazines, publishers, and newspaper editors who wanted vertical frames to fit a tabloid format. The Recipes for Health column represented a challenge, in that I had to shoot everything in the horizontal plane, and I had all this frame to deal with that I had never had to contend with before. It was an adjustment, and I played and toyed and experimented an awful lot to become comfortable with wider compositions that now seem effortless.



The Recipes for Health column was very ingredient-focused and gave me the opportunity to make evocative ingredient shots. That long-term assignment really influenced my work going forward. These apricots did not need much help to look this delicious.



Daniel Krieger was one of the first photographers I saw do this framing well. He made restaurant photos more interesting by using this "off the table to black" technique. It was something I admired, and it was a great way to extend my use of the black background from a different angle in a studio setting.



If you know that you have to make a big layout shot from a top angle, you have the opportunity to play with all of the real estate in the frame, using shapes and color to create something graphic as well as delicious.



Simple shots of ingredients, such as these tomatoes, have garnered a lot of attention for my work. Whenever I publish or post a shot like this, the feedback is incredible.

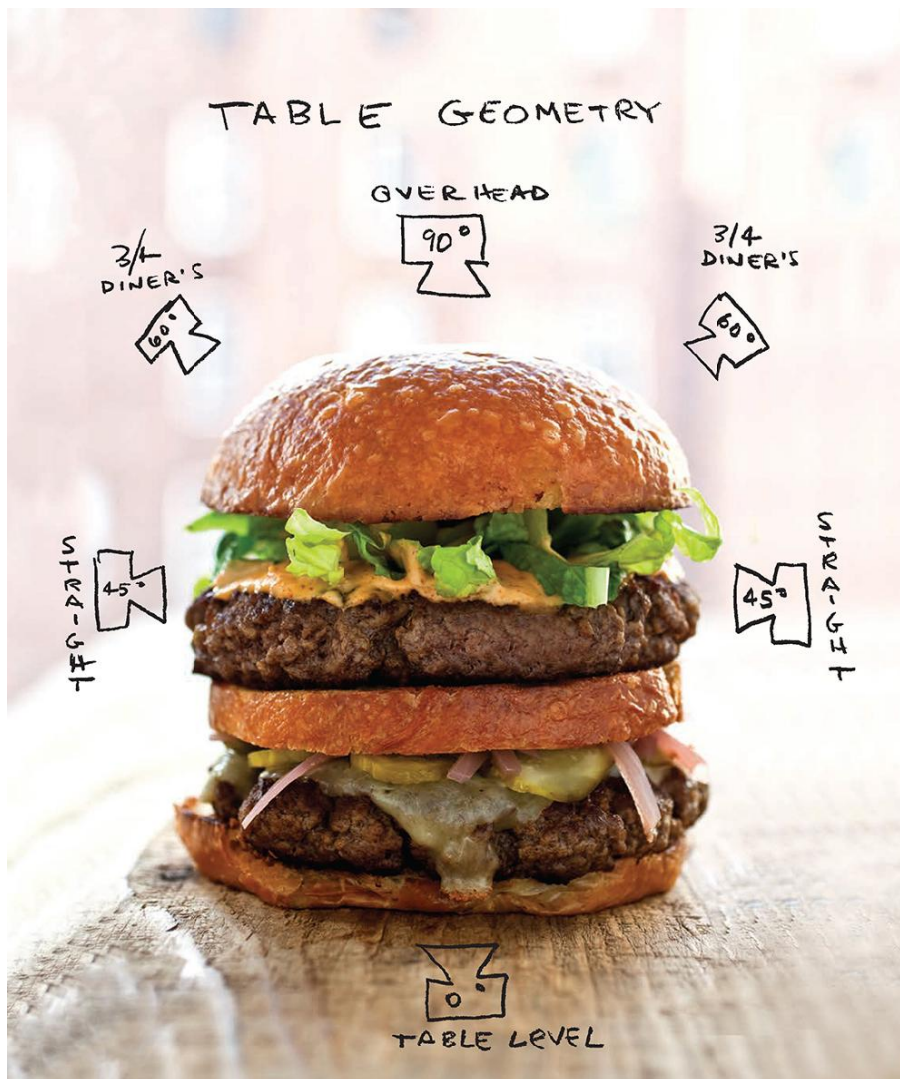


Table Geometry

Several years ago, I taught a workshop at the StarChefs Congress in New York. I was asked by a friend and fellow food photographer, Michael Harlan Turkell, to copresent with him. The goal was to teach our workflow and methodology regarding how we approach a food shoot. MHT, as we like to refer to Michael, had a very interesting technique he wanted to share with the group, and he showed me something that I had never truly thought about when dealing with

artists rather than students at large.

When I was a classroom teacher, I was very aware that different students learned different ways. I was taught that teaching a right-brained kid and a left-brained kid the very same lesson might take two very different lesson plans. When I taught photography students, I had, up to that point, only considered the right-brained artistic learner. But then I taught with MHT. The right-brained or “artistic” types in our workshop tended to be more visual/verbal learners, and the left-brained or more “mathematical” learners responded better to numbers and structure. Not the typical profile for a photographer. But photography does have a significant mathematical component, and working with Michael really helped me to understand that we need to teach for both right- and left-brain learners.

Michael is extraordinarily left-brained for a photographer, and he had come up with a geometric methodology for getting shot coverage in a food shoot. He explained that he used the shape of an arc to map out the table, ensuring that he would capture all of the requisite shots he would need. I will try to explain both the left- and right-brain versions of this stylistic approach simultaneously, since when I was tested, as part of my teacher training, it turned out that I am actually what is called middle-brained: equal parts left- and right-brained.

Consider the table, a flat surface, and draw an arc over the table. At 0 degrees, you are shooting your subject from the same level of the table, so I will call this “table-level perspective.” At 45 degrees, you would be at what I would call the “diner’s perspective,” or where you would see the food if you were getting ready to eat it. And at 90 degrees, you would be directly over your subject for a “top-down perspective,” or a top shot. MHT and I have almost the exact same workflow and methodology for achieving coverage of a subject, but we learned it and teach it in very different languages. I teach it using verbal descriptions and Michael uses mathematical expression, but we both achieve the same exact results. Using variations of those three angle positions for every shoot will always guarantee that you get all possible iterations of that subject . . . and your editor won’t call you, looking for that top shot you didn’t get.

I would also like to say that beyond using this approach for picking your coverage angles, you can also use the geometry of the frame itself to achieve maximum coverage for any given subject. Given the need to provide a lot of content for many different platforms at once, it is helpful to think in terms of framing geometry as well as angle geometry when shooting food. All the different platforms use different

aspect ratios, and having placement options is very helpful for your clients. For example, I have a plate that I have shot from all the requisite angles and gotten great coverage, but I put my subject in the center of the frame in every shot. The client may want to have options for laying in text on the page, which would require more space to the right or the left. So taking another coverage pass at the subject with the subject to the right and left of center creates some stylistic differences as well as lots of practical options for the layout. You may need to adjust the styling for each change, but it will be much less stressful than having your client calling and asking for a shot you don't have.



Shooting these Lebanese Beef Croquettes from a low-table angle gave me a chance to use the backlight and create more depth in the image. This is a more cinematic approach and can give a less dynamic subject new life.



Shooting this dish from a dramatic table-level angle gave me an opportunity to showcase the copper pot. I borrowed it from a food producer I work with who borrowed it from her grandmother. Both were happy it got its 15 minutes of fame.



Some of the propping elements I have in my collection may sit for years before they are used in a shoot. The fabrics in this shot, which we acquired on vacation a decade before, proved perfect for this story and the food. Buy props not just for the shoot you have now but for the ones you may have in the future. The time to buy a prop that catches your eye is right at that moment.



The zinc surface in this image was bought at auction for a very tidy sum. I had to outbid several other food shooters for this one because I had lost the bids for the previous three at the auction. It has proven well worth the investment. Zinc is great because it is usually matte and takes light really well. Also, the zinc weathers to take on complex silver grey tones that work well for food. Keep an eye out for zinc in antique stores and flea markets.

What Is in My Studio?

In short, I have too much in my studio. This is a good problem. I have props, gear, grip, lighting, every piece of food equipment I can use and some I never will. My studio has beautiful southwestern light, and

I have set up two sawhorses with a huge slab of granite on them in front of the windows to form my shooting table. I have a few hundred different table surfaces I can put on top of the sawhorses. I installed black theatrical curtains around the whole room, so I can darken the room for film lighting. I built big, custom-made diffusion panels to fit inside the window frames to dampen and shape the light on my table. I have V-flats and flags and stands and all manner of things to bend, shape, and craft light. My studio is my happy place, and even when I am not shooting, I love being there.

Since I recently began directing and shooting video, I have moved away from strobe lighting and now I have an impressive collection of LED steady lighting that I am very comfortable with. The steady lighting option for food photographers is a great one, especially if you have gotten used to shooting with natural light. You can create one big, steady light source with something like an ARRI SkyPanel, diffuse and shape the light like you would daylight, and—with some practice—get very similar results to that of your daylight projects. This has been a revelation for me, and it allows me to shoot stills and video with the same lighting, which offers my clients terrific flexibility. There are many options in every price range that could get you results you will love with LED lighting. ARRI is the industry standard and is pretty expensive, but it's the last light you will ever have to buy for tabletop food photography. I also have lighting from Dracast, Fiilex, LiteGear, and Quasar that all work really well for what we do.



It's more than just taking pretty
pictures . . .

Chapter 4.

Telling a Story



Observing people in lifestyle situations, and making notes about the way an event feels, can really influence how you cover food with cultural sensitivity. Images like this one informed a later story I did about Cajun food.

Composing a beautiful shot is one thing, but telling a story through a series of photos—or even a single photo—requires a different level of care and creativity.

In our studio, we use storyboards for plenty of narrative storytelling applications, from films to commercials to advertising pitches called treatments. What I am trying to express is that for any story, and especially for a food story, the visual progression of images should help support and advance the story we are hoping to tell, and if those images do not accomplish that, then they have no place in the story. Some of the things I stress are the importance of cultural accuracy, the attention we pay to seasonality, and the emotional nature of what food means to people. It's very personal.

For example, I was shooting a story for *Eating Well* magazine about Cajun food in Louisiana. It wasn't enough to make sure the food looked delicious. Everything had to be right. The propping, the silverware, the kind of beer on the table . . . all of it. A year earlier, I had been to a big Cajun party hosted by a famous Cajun LSU professor and radio host, Barry Ancelet. His mother, Maude, taught some of the great chefs of New Orleans how to properly make a roux. These were serious food people. I took about two thousand photos that weekend, and later I used those images as reference material for that *Eating Well* shoot. That was my storyboard. We got so much amazing feedback about that story because we really nailed the look, the feel, the cultural cues, and the sense of what that food represents to those people. That is the essence of good visual narrative storytelling. It's more than just taking pretty pictures—it's also about showing what the experience was like. So, in short, everything is research, and being observant as a photographer, with or without a camera in your hands, is essential.



Telling a story with one image can be a challenge, but if all the elements are present and you prepare both your shot and the setting, you can make those proverbial 1,000-word shots. Capturing people acting how they would naturally act, without a lot of direction, often gets great results.

What Is a Visual Narrative?

The essential question when considering the essence of the story you intend to tell is: what is a visual narrative? Think about a comic strip without any words. Or a silent film. Or how we can communicate with people with our eyes, facial expressions, hands, gestures, and body language. Or emojis. These are all visual narrative forms; they express complex ideas and emotions with pictures. There are many layers to this idea in photography, and we should take some time here to explore what our goals are when we make pictures of food.

Food is an expressly emotional aspect of most of our lives. We have distinct preferences and aversions. We have holidays and traditions, and some of our most important memories are attached to food. The thing that is so special about this is that there is both a commonality and a particular individuality to our stories about food. It is all very personal. Capturing a story about food can take on many forms photographically, but let's start with the most common: the single image narrative.

The single image narrative is usually represented as that one image at the top of a news story or blog article or social media post that is aimed at conveying the gist of the written story or caption or relates to a part of it in some way. I believe it should play a greater role, and the best photography across genres does just that. The finest single image narratives are stand-alone or at the very least expand the story beyond the text. The best ones need nothing beyond what is right there in front of you to tell the whole story. This is my goal with every image I make.

I understand that this is a lofty goal, but if you approach your work with the aim of being not just a photographer but a storyteller, it helps as you prepare to tell your story with a camera. Every aspect of the frame should be considered. Let's forget the food for a second and think about everything else. Let's think about the light. Is this dish a summer or winter dish? What is the light like at that time of year? Okay, now you have determined that it's a winter dish . . . that will influence several other components of the composition. You should now choose a color palette that agrees with your seasonality. This will then, in turn, influence your prop choices, surface, and environment.

Once you have a general sense of these things, we can consider the

food. Is it ethnic? Does it get eaten in any specific way culturally? Are there any props that would be essential to the preparation or consumption of this food? Is it associated with a particular holiday or cultural experience? Be familiar with all of the ancillary aspects of the food experience you are about to capture and try to represent the dish in a way that would ring true for people who know that food. People who have experiences with and memories of the food should see something of themselves in your composition. Avoid clichés, obviously. Be culturally sensitive without falling back on the tropes that are ever-present in our media.

Sometimes the simplest thing creates the mood of the story. One of the photos I have taken and used to illustrate this idea is one I shot for the *New York Times* Recipes for Health column. It was about dining alone at home in the evening. The recipe was an egg poached in tomato sauce and served with grated cheese, so it's vaguely Italian. It was also a winter recipe and obviously an evening meal in spite of the egg in the bowl. So my challenge was to tell this story without making it look like a breakfast meal at first glance. The light is subtly vignettied, like an overhead lamp lit the table. The tabletop was a homey crackled green (my nod to the homeland, and it goes great with red sauce). I included wine to avoid the scene being mistaken for breakfast (unless our diner is a lush). The topper was a magazine—the simplest little storyteller. I included the magazine as the final touch for a few reasons: people often read when they eat alone, and they often read magazines at night while they read newspapers in the morning.

This may seem like an awful lot of thinking for one picture, but taken all together, the composition of the shot told the whole story. If one looks carefully enough and considers everything I put into the shot, it's all there. That is the essence of a single image narrative.



I have used this photo to teach the concept of visual narratives almost since the day I took it. I have featured it in my CreativeLive classes and in a lecture on visual storytelling at Columbia University.

Single Image Narrative: From MoMA to the Kentucky Derby

The core of visual storytelling as it applies to photography involves being able to tell an entire story with a single image. When there is something that goes deeper than the surface of a well-composed, well-exposed, and well-developed image, that picture can live a long life in your portfolio.

Sometimes that image is about being in the right place at the right time—you push the shutter release and something magical happens. For instance, I was once on assignment for the *Wall Street Journal* at the Modern. The Modern is the restaurant attached to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and I was there to photograph their interiors and the bar with a particular wine they serve. It was a tough shoot because I could not bring lights, and it was just at dusk and the light was fading. At the time we were shooting with second generation DSLR cameras that were not particularly good in low light. The images tended to break up when you would take the camera to its technical limits as the light went down. The pictures would come out grainy. We call this a noisy image—when the blacks start to look pixelated and the colors blur into one another.

I did bring a tripod to help with this, so I set up my bar shot, adjusted the camera on it, and hoped for the best. The foreground of my image was the glass of white wine on the bar next to the bottle with the label showing, and the background was the interior of the restaurant in very soft focus. I started clicking away, but all of a sudden a waiter, with his black hair in a ponytail and wearing a bright red shirt, walked through the background of my frame mid-shot. At first, I was annoyed . . . until I saw what I had captured. His positioning was perfect, right between the glass and the bottle. He was soft and way out of focus, so just his outline was visible. And because of the way the camera was set, it actually looked like a Claude Monet painting had just walked into my wine shot. It was remarkable, and incredibly serendipitous, to make this shot at the restaurant in the MoMA. I was in the right place at the right time, and one image told an entire story.



My accidental piece of modern art that happened to be created at The Museum of Modern Art in New York City. I was on assignment for the *Wall Street Journal*.



When she loaned me the tumblers for the Mint Julep shoot, I did not tell Florence Fabricant that it was for a *Wall Street Journal* story.

Obviously, you cannot always count on the cosmos to provide a perfect moment for you, so there are times when nothing but proper research, planning, and execution will allow you to tell a single image narrative properly.

Back in 2007, I was asked to photograph the signature cocktail of the Kentucky Derby, the mint julep, also for the *Wall Street Journal*. If you Google “Kentucky Derby drink,” you will get several thousand images of mint juleps, but only certain images tell the whole story. When you have something so identifiable with an iconic annual event like the Kentucky Derby, you have three incentives to get it right. First, you do not want to be a fraud. If you are a knowledgeable food photographer, you must know that a proper Kentucky mint julep must be served in a sterling silver or pewter tumbler with beading around the top and bottom. You must also know that a mint leaf is the only garnish that’s acceptable. Secondly, if you get this image right, you will be able to use it in resale stock until the end of time. Newspapers and magazines write about the Kentucky Derby and its traditions every year without fail, and nailing a great shot of the mint julep will be something you can sell over and over again. Lastly, if you have only one chance to tell the whole story of a drink that is as steeped in history as the mint julep, every detail needs to be perfect.

While doing my research for the shoot, I consulted with the Grand Dame of the *New York Times* Food section, Florence Fabricant. If anyone I knew had those tumblers, I mean the “right” ones, it was FloFab. Sure enough, she had the tumblers, and she loaned them to me under penalty of death if anything ever happened to them. They were a family heirloom, and the Derby was only a few weeks away.

The lesson here is that many things in food photography are rooted in traditions and history, and being aware and sensitive to those things and preparing yourself before you make the shot allows you to tell those stories well. In a single image narrative, you literally get one shot, and you have to make it count.

Multiple Image Narrative

When you set out to tell a uniquely visual story in a very specific environment, one of the tools that many photographers—particularly in the food and lifestyle space—choose to use is a multiple image narrative. It is usually accompanied by text, and this is what separates

this style from a photo essay. This format is more appropriate when attempting to tell a story that has a bigger message than a single image narrative, especially when you are attempting to tell a story with a broader scope. You will typically see this kind of story layout with magazine stories, the chapters of books, or long, narrative editorial stories in newspapers or blogs. The theory is that in the absence of one singular image that could tell the story fully, a photographer (in conjunction with his or her editor) will choose this approach to give the reader a deeper, maybe less metaphorical approach to the narrative, and the photography will become a little more journalistic.

These types of stories often take more than one day of shooting, and sometimes they become long-term projects. In late 2017, I began a project for *Eating Well* magazine that was due to publish in the March/April 2018 issue. The scope of the idea was much bigger than one image, or even a few images, could sustain. The concept was that along the 7 line of the New York City subway system, there are many immigrant communities with a variety of cuisines, and that you could take a “world culinary tour” by just riding the train and jumping off at different stops. We also decided that, by singling out chicken as a common ingredient, we could show how one ordinary protein is used by so many different cultures in their food.

It was a big job. We needed to scout and visit the areas up and down the line to identify restaurants that made specific dishes we wanted to highlight. We photographed people, both strangers in the street and some of the people we met in the restaurants we chose to cover. We also needed environmental imagery to give our readers the flavor of the areas along the line and how they have similarities and differences. Finally, we reengineered the dishes we experienced for the *Eating Well* reader and did a full recipe shoot in my studio. The entire process included about 10 shoot days and an equal amount of scout days and took about five months. Since the story was due to publish in the spring, we tried to avoid very wintry scenes and had to postpone some shooting because of the weather.

The resulting package of images told a rich story, and coupled with the fantastic food writing of JJ Goode, who documented our experience, it brought the readers to a new place—the way good travel writing and photography should. It is the best example of the multiple image narrative I have participated in to date.



The combination of in-the-field photojournalism and studio food photography allowed me to craft the story through the inspiration I found in meeting my subjects and eating their food. It was a great experience.





The “see-through” train shot was accomplished with a very long shutter with the camera on a tripod and is one of my favorite images from this story. It actually did not make the cut for the magazine. It was freezing that night.



When I shoot editorially in public spaces, I generally do not get model releases from subjects. If shooting for advertising or for stock resale, that is a different story. So, I make it a practice to try to get as many releases as I can.

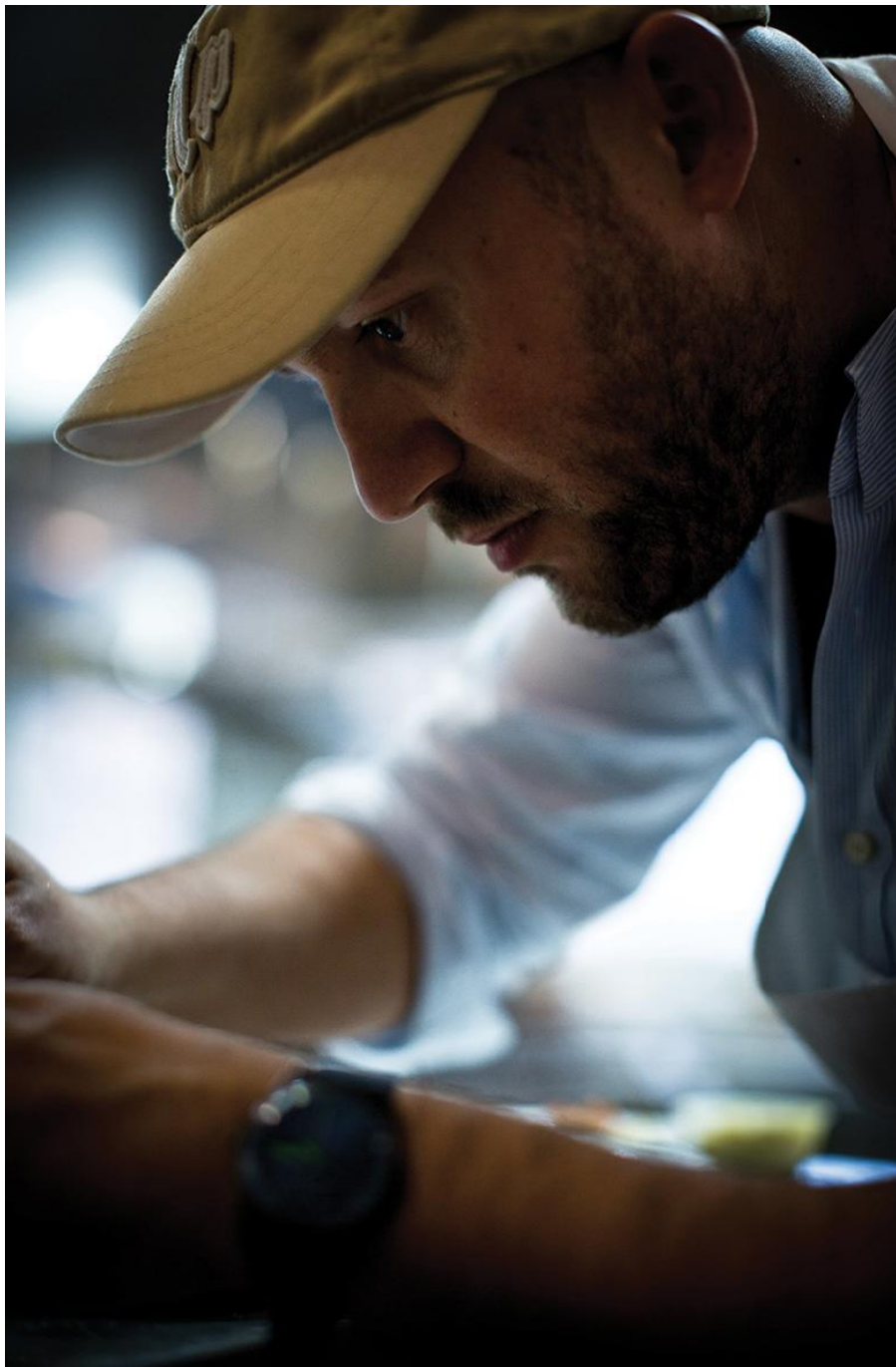
Photo Essay Narratives

The photo essay narrative, which is sometimes referred to as a slideshow narrative, is a purely visual approach that does not include any accompanying story or text element beyond caption information. This can also be a very journalistic approach, and can be accomplished in any time frame the photographer chooses to sculpt the narrative in. Some photo essays can be just one day, but some can take years, even decades, to complete. The common thread in this approach is a desire to tell a story that uses a progression of images to either solidify the thesis of the project or show the narrative passing of time in the essay. In food photography, these photo essay narratives can take on many forms, including a photographic step-by-step that can be shown to instruct a viewer on how to do something or how something is created.

One photo essay that I shot a few years ago is a good example of a single-day, short narrative photo essay that used a progression of images to tell the story of a chef from Argentina visiting the

International Culinary Center. He was there to show a group of senior instructors—who all happened to be fairly famous chefs—how he, even though he comes from a culinary tradition known for using an open flame, embraced sous vide cooking in his techniques. Sous vide is a method of cooking using a warm water bath to slow-cook foods and achieve deeper flavors sometimes lost through the traditional cooking process.

The imagery was to be used very much like another application we use in filmmaking, called animatics, which I will cover shortly. Basically, what I was trying to do with this essay was tell the story of this visiting chef, nervous about cooking for these masters and the media on their home turf, and apprehensive about whether or not he could impress them. I documented each step of the day. I watched for the moments and compositions that could help advance that storyline and, most importantly, tried to make myself as invisible as possible, so as to not influence the proceedings or push my agenda. The product of that day was a series of images that took the viewer through the experience from the chef's perspective and ultimately implied that he was very successful in his mission. My goal in building this package was to think about it as if I were trying to make a film of this story, planning to use each of my pictures as a pivot point for a particular scene. This is, of course, what storyboarding is, and being familiar with this approach helped me immensely as I moved into directing commercials and producing film projects.



Try to use the close up, as you might cinematically, to capture the intensity of the moment for a character. Here I was trying to capture the importance of this preparation for chef Dante Liporace.



From the *New York Times* article “Barrage of Beef, Argentine Style,” the caption reads: “The chef Dante Liporace, left, prepares bife de chorizo while the chef Guido Magnaguagno, right, tastes provolone cream, for ‘Secuencia de la Vaca.’”



We get a sense of the characters in the story with this establishing shot of chef Guido Magnaguagno leading a lecture. This image is setting the scene for what is at stake. He is clearly invested in his presentation, and it is apparent in the action and in his facial expression.



Animatics

When a film director on a movie or a short or an art director on a commercial is planning out her story, she often uses storyboards to plot or block out the specific shots that will make up the scene-to-scene advancement of the story. My first experience with this technique goes way back to before I had ever considered directing. It was actually my first real experience in advertising. When the producer emailed me to ask if I had ever shot animatics before, I had to look it up to know what she was talking about. I of course told her I

had, once I knew what it was, and I got a job shooting the animatics for a fast casual restaurant commercial.

The experience was just like shooting a photo essay, except on a much grander scale, and with the very specific purpose of providing guideposts for the director to follow when shooting the commercial. This was the experience that taught me so much about narrative storytelling with pictures, especially once I saw the actual commercial and how it literally went shot for shot with the storyboard I had created for them. This was a launching pad for so much of what I have done in my career in both photography and film. It opened doors for me in advertising and lit a spark in me to learn about filmmaking and pursue my desire to direct.

I want to sidebar here, because I think it's important to be transparent about my progression in this business. It was a risk taking that job, because I really was ill-prepared for the scope of the work . . . but I knew enough to get help. I reached out to three of my most trusted friends in the industry, who had much more experience than I did, to help me. I needed to light a gigantic dining room, and I had to light people—two things I had zero experience doing. By getting the help I needed and, more importantly, by putting my ego in check and asking for it, I opened many avenues for myself that are still playing out well over a decade later. I was already a known photographer, but I had a very narrow scope of experience, so I needed help. After that job I went back to school at Pratt Institute to learn how to light. I owned up to the fact that I did not know it all and became a better artist for it.

Motion

Lastly, I want to talk about how photography and motion capture are alike in one very specific way: the concept of push and pull. Whenever I put together a package of images for a story or a narrative essay or a cookbook or even an advertising treatment, I think about push and pull. A more common way to describe this is in film terminology: the wide, the medium, and the tight shot. My goals in presenting images to an editor is to give her a range of perspectives that tell a full story of what my subject is about and what it has to offer visually.

I think we all, in the age of Instagram, understand the concept of the best shot angle for any given format. I think we have also gotten

much more familiar with the idea of aspect ratios. The one thing that is sometimes challenging to remember is that thinking about shooting anything from multiple focal lengths is just as important to the narrative as those other things. I use the overlap language between photography and film when describing the push and pull method of coverage. You always want to achieve full coverage of a subject so you can tell its whole story “cinematically,” even with photography. Imagine your shots as the opening to a video (my shots were used this way for the *New York Times* A Good Appetite videos for years, and they were meant to set the scene for what was about to be an instructional video about making that dish). By varying my angles and focal lengths, I give the viewer a more complete picture of the story they are about to watch, creating a more cinematic look for the overall package. Think about the establishing shots at the beginning of a movie . . . that’s exactly what you should aim to create with every story you shoot.



When we use multiple images to push a narrative forward, we try to give the viewer an orderly timeline, using different focal lengths at different points in the story.

Are you ready to take the next
step and launch your own
business?

Chapter 5.

Making a Living

Rules

**Know your
worth.**

Five

**Never, ever
give it away.**

of

**Exposure
on social
media is a
myth.**

the

**When
opportunity
knocks,
kick down
the door.**

Biz

Money is

not the
only
compensation.

Imagine this: You've posted a beautiful, moody picture of your favorite dessert on your Instagram account. You get more likes than ever before, and, in the comments, you've even had some feelers from what seem like legitimate outlets . . .

My advice is to stop for a moment and read this chapter. In it, I will explain how the business works from experience, mine and others. I'll tell you what to ask for, what to look for, what to expect, and what not to accept.

There are no spreadsheets or business plans in this chapter. I approach it from my perspective, with insight on finding your own style and knowing how to sell it well. I share the "The 10 Questions" every food photographer should ask before taking on a job. I'll discuss pricing and partnership, and most importantly, the best ways to find work. You may be surprised that I suggest being involved with the shopping, chopping, and prepping of the food. To me, spending that time in the kitchen means that the end result will look like I want and expect it to look. There will be no surprises, like a bell pepper split vertically instead of horizontally when it comes time to stuff it.

In addition to those details, I'll get into self-promotion and ways to get your work in front of the right eyeballs. Many of you are trying to build a following on social media. There are certain ways to make your photographs stand out. I've pulled together some "Rules to Post By," as well as listing some of the common mistakes of food photography on social media (never flash your food!).

I am sharing my knowledge, and always have, for one very good reason: our business is not unionized or organized in any way. Our work can be priced in so many different ways, even in the best circumstances. If we don't have some collective understanding of what professionalism is in our business, then it eventually won't be sustainable for any of us. I want the opposite to be true.

I had help, too, when I started out, and I encourage everyone to ask questions and connect with photographers you admire. Two of my closest friends, Joe Fornabaio and Jen Pugliese, were also my mentors

at the beginning of my career. Joe taught me how to be a photographer, and Jen taught me how to be a professional photographer. And I still talk to both of them almost every day. Both are a little younger than I am and look up to me like a big brother at times, but without their collective knowledge of this business, I would not be writing these words. I consistently went to both of them, people who had a decade of experience before I ever went on an assignment, to help me navigate the business. You all need a Joe or a Jen in your life. I have many other mentors and I've been one for some people. Some of you will pay it forward and mentor others. It builds strength in our business.

The Blind Squirrel

You may have heard the old saying: even a blind squirrel gets a nut once in a while. Almost anyone can occasionally capture an absolutely beautiful photograph, accidentally or semi-accidentally. When this happens, it is usually followed by a social media post of said image into the echo chamber of friends, loved ones, and potential clients. There sometimes then exists an illusion that this photographer is ready to start taking on clients and getting paid to make images in her “style.” Then the phone rings and it's someone asking that photographer to make them some more pictures “just like the one” that was on her Instagram feed.

Let's unpack why I see this as a problem, and why the photographer in this scenario should be terrified. First, let's get one thing perfectly straight: I want every photographer to be really successful and make lots of money in this business. I really do. My anecdotes here are meant as cautionary tales, and my solutions are meant to help you create a sustainable business and understand the landscape. It's better for all of us that way.

I'd like to take a second to understand the whole euphemism about the squirrel I mentioned at the start of this section. The blind squirrel is clearly grasping around in the dark, as most of us are at the beginning of our photographic careers. Sometimes the squirrel finds a nut, but it's not because he has a plan or expertise. He simply gets lucky or has a narrow skill set that helps him arrive at success frequently enough to believe he is getting it right.

When amateur photographers stumble into a good photo like the

squirrel stumbles upon a nut, they often seek the approval of people who either don't know photography, like their work no matter what, or have a very narrow view of what they are actually capable of. It's important to remember that editors, art buyers, and creative directors are always looking to discover new (less expensive) artists to create content. Ultimately, all of these things mean that we may be courted by a client who thinks we can execute a job, and we believe—because everyone likes our photos—that we are ready to accept the job. This is often a problem.

To understand how this can be harmful, let's consider a couple of cases.



Case 1

Emily (not her real name) was developing as an artist and doing all the right things: shooting a lot, taking classes, developing relationships with local businesses, and building her web presence and social media accounts. All good steps. Her website was scarce but populated with lovely images she had made in her apartment, by herself, with minimal gear and no help. Her work looked professional enough, but her expertise was shooting with window light only, in her space with her gear. She had no assisting experience and had never actually been on a real photo set.

Then a big-name client came calling. They loved her website. They wanted to hire her. First she was elated . . . and then she was terrified. Here's why.

She had no idea how to negotiate the job and had no representation to do so for her. She also had never shot anywhere but her own apartment. She did not know how to rent a studio, let alone shoot in one. She did not know any food stylists, how to use strobe lights, talk to clients, art directors, etc. You get the picture.

Now, many of these things would have been the responsibility of a producer, if she had known to call one and give a price to the client that included one. But she did not. The food part would also be okay if

she could reach out and find some people in the community who knew food stylists. Easy fix. The hardest thing about all of this is twofold, and the most important part of working commercially in photography. First, she had only shot in one environment with one lighting setup with gear that was not powerful enough for the job. She could not just find someone to fix that. Those are problems related to lack of experience. Second, she had never either negotiated with or dealt with a client of this level, and she had no idea of the expectations that would be placed on her. These experiences are learned, and they take time and tact to navigate. They're all things you can indeed learn, but not in a week.

Emily had to pass on the job, and she was really embarrassed and disappointed. I spoke with her about the situation and was excited for her for one very big reason: she got years' worth of experience just by failing at this one job. She now knew where she was lacking, what questions to ask, and how to reach out for help. She had the eye they liked, and now all she had to do was learn the business and her craft.

She is now a working professional photographer with some very good clients.

Case 2

A creative director at a major food magazine was looking at current cookbooks for new talent. One book, written and shot by a blogger, caught her eye and she decided to offer this writer a very big spread in the magazine. A pretty simple offer in theory, but since the writer lived on the other side of the world from the creative director, they decided to move forward without any on-set direction. Big mistake.

Now, the author's book looked terrific. It was slick and professional. The food was styled impeccably. But the author did not have any experience beyond shooting for himself. No professional portfolio, just a well-executed blog and a very well-defined style. This would prove to be a handicap once the art direction strayed outside his comfort zone. Still, he took the gig. He couldn't pull it off, and, as a result, the magazine had to reshoot to entire piece. Not being prepared for your big moment—and not admitting it—can be a real setback. Beyond just the assignment at hand, being unprepared can affect your reputation.

Not being prepared for your big

moment—and not admitting it—
can be a real setback.

No Byline Needed

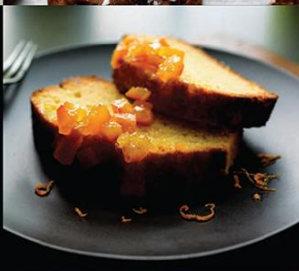
As a photographer, I have been very fortunate, and people have been exceedingly generous with their praise of my work. I appreciate all the feedback very much. If I had a dollar for every Instagram or Facebook comment with just the word *YUM*, I could retire to that wonderful little chateau in the south of France I dream of. If that ever happens, you'll know where to find me. But there is one compliment that consistently stands out for me, and it took some time for me to hear it. I truly feel like I have accomplished something in my career every single time I hear someone say to me, "I knew it was your picture without ever reading the byline."

Defining oneself, and in some cases redefining oneself, in a field that is saturated with imagery is a really challenging prospect. As I write this, I am speaking to both you and me simultaneously. Trying to find, employ, and become known for a particular style in photography is the one thing, aside from getting hired consistently, that is the most challenging.

In trying to define yourself, it is important to remember that finding a niche that represents your best work, at least initially, can really help this process. I have very often looked at the portfolios and websites of photographers I have taught and trained and given them some simple advice: highlight what you do best and lose the rest. Sometimes this is very painful, because it means letting go of the things you really enjoy photographing, but when an objective viewer tells you that you have an eye for this and not that, it is wise to listen.

I have a very close friend, a brilliant photographer, who actually required an intervention by several of his closest friends in the industry to get him to stop taking portraits. The reportage work he did on his own was stunning and dwarfed the portraiture in his portfolio. He was reluctant, but eventually took the advice and abandoned it. His work became more focused, concise, and meaningful. His style emerged as a result, and better assignments came his way.

Social media is an important aspect of how you portray your work to potential clients and is a really good way to gauge what you do best . . . even without a portfolio review or an intervention. Start there to see what people are reacting to, and whittle down your feed, your website, and your portfolio to only the things you do best. In my case, it was tabletop photography. I had an eye for it, and it served me really well. Even now, and even though I have done so much more in my career, it is still that niche that has brought the most attention to my style as a photographer, and I try to pay attention to that every day and expand the way I frame, light, and compose images within the style that has gotten me here.







Shopping, Chopping, and Propping

Food photographers should be control freaks.

The odd dichotomy of being a food photographer is that when we first start, we often do a lot of the production alone until we can

afford help. We usually shop, prep, cook, food style, prop, and shoot without any help. Then, as we get more successful, we work with all these other artists with whom we have to collaborate to get to a final product. Sometimes this is a tough transition.

The great gift of starting from scratch in this business is that you acquire an excellent working knowledge of all of the jobs that are required to make great food photography. First, it starts at the market. This is the garbage-in-garbage-out concept on full display. I have remained a complete control freak about the ingredients that go into my images simply because I learned that doing your own ingredient selection really makes a difference in the final output. Even now that it is less common for me to be at the market picking the ingredients, I still have input into that process and I know what I want—and, more importantly, what I don't want. Those long days of buying (and hauling) ingredients up the three flights of stairs to my studio are deeply ingrained into my workflow. One big lesson here: don't use online markets or delivery services. In my experience, they pawn off the older produce on the customers who do not show up in person to buy them. Cynical, I guess, but I have gotten wilted lettuce a few too many times to not be.

The next big part of the process is the preparation of the food. When we do this ourselves, we manage this whole step, but once we work with others we still need to be involved. I learned that if you are not engaged in how the food is cut, chopped, refreshed, and ultimately cooked and plated, there is a chance that you will be unhappy with one aspect of that presentation. For example, if you wanted the green beans cut on the bias for your *salade Niçoise* masterpiece and the stylist cut them straight because you either were not watching or did not specify your desire to have them cut that way, this is your fault. We need to shepherd the project and not just wait in the studio for plated food to arrive. You may be making these decisions, or maybe an art director is guiding the shoot, but either way, you need to be in charge of your team.



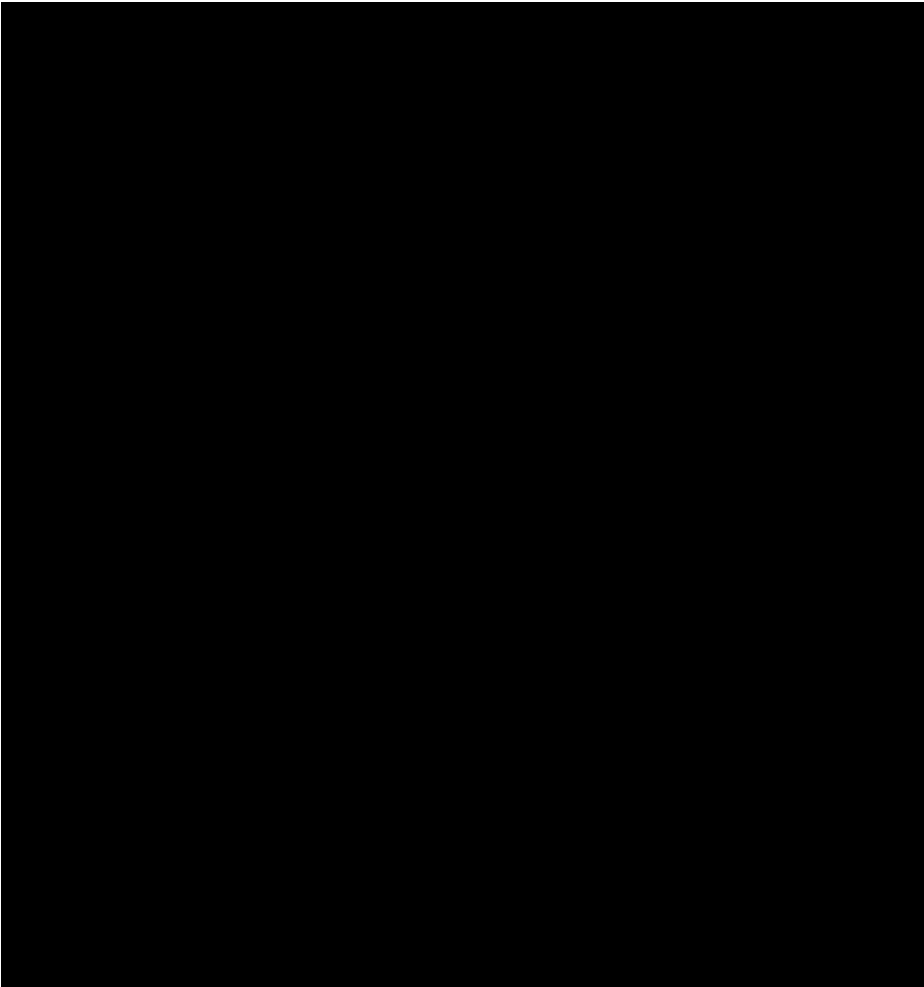
Sometimes you may take liberties with food prep pictures to make a good image. You will rarely see an egg like this in real food prep, but it is a staple in food photography process pictures.

The overall style and feel of your work in food photography is reliant not only upon your prowess with a camera but also upon your sense of the food being shot, how it's plated, and which props that food will be plated on. The overall composition relies as much on the mood and feel of the table surface, the flatware, linen, and color scheme as it does on the lighting and your choice of lens. You must develop or follow distinct art direction that covers the entirety of the composition and have it work seamlessly through all aspects of the image.

Our goal as food photographers is to essentially maintain the level of control over our images that we develop at the beginning of our career. We must build a workflow that includes communicating with the other artists on our sets. We often do it all as we build our portfolios. As we progress into the latter stages, when we are hopefully more successful and working with others, we can strive to become more like art directors, influencing the overall look and feel of a story, book, or campaign.



Capturing the unique and delicately beautiful technique of these process shots was essential to the story. Also, in food recipes, it becomes very important to show the reader difficult preparations visually.





We had to execute several large overhead table presentations as chapter breaks in one of the cookbooks I shot. One of the main challenges in these compositions is styling all of the food at the same time.



By creating a small world, like this macro scene of the lemonade pouring, you can layer styling elements to tell a much larger story. In this tight frame we have color, depth, and movement helping us create the scene.



Creating a mood in your styling, particularly with a darker composition and then having just the right pop of color, helps direct the viewer to the important aspects of the composition.

Art and Business

Starting a little late in this business gave me some perspective that has been of great value to me. First, I was a divorced father with a lot of bills by the time I took my first professional photograph for money. I had watched several of my friends get crushed financially trying to be the “artist” photographer. People liking my photography on social media did not pay the rent, and potential employers offering “exposure” on their website instead of money didn’t fill my gas tank. I was not a kid trying to make it in the big city; I was an adult trying to survive in it. This gave me the courage to have a no-nonsense negotiation style and the ability to say no to things that would not help me move forward. Don’t get me wrong: I said yes to a lot of crummy assignments, but I did so in the interest of building relationships and securing repeat business. If it became clear that I was doing neither and that the relationship was feeling exploitative, I moved on.

We, as artists, have our egos, self-worth, time, energy, and a lot of money tied up in what we do. It is exhilarating when someone likes our work. The idea of having your work published is the greatest validation. Unfortunately, these two things mean absolutely nothing without the third piece of this triangle: getting paid to do it. Especially in the digital age, we as artists must be very aware that the need for content is intense, and newspapers, websites, blogs, advertisers, and publishing houses will do almost anything to get as much of it as they can for as little as they can. They will flatter you, offer you opportunities to do social media takeovers, promise you exposure, and always claim, “We don’t have a budget . . . but we love your work,” in order to get you to work for free or very little. They know we have those egos. They know we have the souls of artists. They know we are vulnerable and need that validation. So if all you need is that validation . . . then by all means do whatever you want. But if you want to make a living in this business, then quote Cuba Gooding Jr. in *Jerry Maguire* and scream from the rooftops, “SHOW ME THE MONEY!”

I give you this pep talk in hopes that you will take as much time absorbing information about the business of food photography as you will with a section on lighting or composition. We are artists, but we

must learn to be businesspeople if we intend to make a living with a camera. It's just that simple.

The 10 Questions

A few years back, when I was teaching my first food photography workshop, I developed a list of questions that any food photographer being asked to price a job should ask the client before quoting any numbers. The first question you are often asked—usually before there is any discussion of the scope of the work—is “What is your rate?” If you answer this question before you have considered these questions, I can promise you that you will be leaving money on the table. If you are lucky enough to get an agent, they will handle much of this, but it is good to understand how negotiations work even when someone else is doing it on your behalf.

1. What is your overall budget?
2. How will you use the images?
3. How many shots do you need?
4. Where are we shooting?
5. Who is cooking the food? Who is styling it?
6. Who is the prop stylist?
7. What is the prop/food budget?
8. When is the deadline for final images?
9. Which file format do you prefer?
10. How would you like your files delivered?



- 1.** What is your budget? This is the response you should give when asked about your rate, because it is a signal to the person asking you the question that you mean to talk business. They usually won't answer, just as you should not. What the question does, though, is set the tone for the remainder of the negotiation. If they do answer—and it's a number you like—ask for 20 percent more and then take what they offered you. If it is a ridiculously low number, then end the negotiation and say that you are not even in the ballpark. This may not end the conversation, but it will signal that you know your worth and won't be taken for a ride. It also sets the tone for any future negotiations with that person.
- 2.** How do you want to use the images? This is a very important question, because it opens the door to a few essential aspects of the value of your photography. First, you need to know if the pictures are for advertising, social, editorial, publishing, or "other" uses (like personal usage or small business promotion). All of these things require different pricing over and above your day rate. If you choose to give a client a flat fee rate, that rate should include both your day rate and the prospective usage of the images, including a time frame for how long they want to use them. If they want a buyout or work-for-hire arrangement, you will need to charge them a lot more, particularly in advertising. I know this opens up a can of worms when talking about pricing your work, but it is so fluid that it is something you learn along the way by talking to other photographers, producers, and art buyers in your area.
- 3.** How many days and shots do you need with variations? Understanding the scope of the work will influence the pricing of the job. You need to plan out food shoots with a lot of

precision, because of how food photography gets made. The pacing of your days really matters, and this is directly influenced by the shot list. Most shot lists start off as too ambitious, but you can influence this if you understand your capabilities and budget very clearly. For example, if your client has 100 dishes to shoot and wants to do so in five days, that means you need to execute 20 dishes a day for five consecutive days. Doing this much is generally not possible without an enormous budget and will usually be rushed and too taxing on you and your crew regardless of budget. You may think it's an extreme example, but it is the starting point for almost every cookbook I have ever negotiated. It all really depends on the complexity of the food, but with a good team I think it's reasonable to attempt five to seven dishes per day. When I say be careful to ask about "variations," it usually means taking different shots of the same food from different angles. This takes time and you should be clear about how many variations you are willing to include with each dish you shoot.



4. Where are we shooting? Having a kitchen/studio at your disposal or a budget to rent one is a big part of any food shoot. If the shoot is happening at a restaurant, is that restaurant an open/working restaurant? You always need to know the environment you will be working in and how conducive it is to the work. If you are expected to shoot and cook in your space, add money to the budget to accommodate that expense. Do not give it away for free.

- 5.** Who is cooking/styling the food? Cooking and styling are not always the same thing. Sometime bigger shoots have both a head stylist who is guiding the kitchen and plating the food on set and people who are cooking strictly at the direction of that stylist or possibly even the photographer. I have worked that way in my career many times. Often they are the same, but you should ask the question. If their answer is you, then budget for that and, as above, do not give it away for free.
- 6.** Who is the prop stylist? This is important because, again, if the answer is you, then you need to consider the shot list and budget appropriately. If the answer is someone else, then you need to know who is hiring that person and what those rates are in your area. If it's you . . . don't give it away for free.
- 7.** What is your prop/food budget? It may seem like a silly question, but I have been on huge jobs where clients have forgotten to budget for food and props. If you don't ask, they may assume it's your responsibility and you will be left with a very large bill that just ate up all your profit from the job. Food and prop budgets grow exponentially as the shot list grows, and you need to remind your client of this.
- 8.** When do you need finals? This falls under the heading of "managing expectations," which is as big a part of the job as taking the pictures. Be very clear with your client about turnaround time. Depending upon the size of the job, you need to budget editing and processing into your timeline for deliverables. If you don't ask, do not be surprised if you are getting phone calls the day after your shoot asking where the images are. If your client is walking away on shoot day with a hard drive with your RAW files and they are doing the post-production, then this is a moot point, but if you are expected to handle this, then budget both time and money into your quote for it.



- 9.** What file format do you prefer? I have learned my lesson the hard way on this. If you assume JPEG, they want TIFF. If you assume TIFF, they want JPEG. Ask the question and don't make your work harder.
- 10.** How would you like your files delivered? Again, it seems silly, but if you always expect a client to know how to use Dropbox or Google Drive, you will be very sorry. There are still

a lot of Luddites out there. Ask your client how they want the images delivered and don't get caught off-guard when they ask for a drive with the images to be messengered over to their offices at 3 p.m.

Asking these questions will make you seem more organized and professional, as well as keeping misunderstandings from happening. You will become a better negotiator and not leave money on the table. Your clients will appreciate your firmness as long as you deliver and keep the process simple and hassle-free. They are also more likely to hire you again if they think their money was well spent.

Pricing

This subject is the one I have gotten the most questions about in my career as a lecturer and teacher, and I think we should dive just a bit deeper into what I touched on in the 10 questions. When you are trying to find that comfort zone with your client, it is important that you never approach a negotiation from a position of weakness, thinking that if you say the wrong thing you will immediately kill the deal. It rarely happens that way, and when it does, it is usually because somebody is negotiating in bad faith. You should arm yourself with knowledge that shows both that you understand your value and that you understand who your client is and what their budgetary threshold may be.



This is a great example of an image that suggests a bigger client but was actually a more modest job. The client did, however, prove to be a good repetitive client in the long run.

Once you understand what area of the business this client is coming from and you have covered all the bases in those initial questions, it then becomes necessary at times to find even greater clarity about who you are doing business with. Sometimes we think that because a client comes to you with a recognizable brand or entity, it means that there is a lot of money in the budget. This is a big mistake. The client is not as important as who is representing the client. For example, I have shot for some very big, brand-name liquor companies, and at face value, you would think that these are my biggest clients. You would be wrong. You would be wrong because of how these clients reached out to me. Rather than coming to me through my agent or through an advertising company, they reached out directly to me through their public relations arm. This is immediately a signal that they are looking for something other than broad-reaching campaign work and will not have the budget you would assume. This is still a good gig, but you must negotiate it like something bigger than editorial but a lot less than traditional advertising. This often works out in your favor regardless, because there is far less pressure, the stakes are much lower, and you usually deal with a smaller team of people. It can also become regular business far more easily than campaign work. This kind of work is a weird hybrid that you need to learn the pricing for, but like social content creation and client direct work (which is ad work without the agency), the budgets are smaller but they shoot more often. If you get in good with these kinds of clients, you can make very good money and build your portfolio with recognizable brand names.

I think one important thing to remember about this industry, like many others, is that it can be very difficult to jump into it, even at the lowest levels. I have told students for many years that small bylines can lead to bigger bylines and compensation is not always money. Let me explain.

When I talk about bylines, I am also talking about pieces of work for your portfolio. Getting work at smaller publications or websites or local restaurants or food purveyors may give you an opportunity to shoot quality food for your own promotion. You can offer your services for money, but also be open to bartering or trade when it seems mutually beneficial for both parties. You may end up with a good creative partnership or repeat client from this exercise.



It can be very important to be creatively flexible and understand the branding needs of your potential clients. This was my attempt to make a very high-profile condiment company understand I could execute their aesthetic in a proposal I sent in to try to land the gig.



I could not get enough of this handmade orcihiette pasta. The scene was not staged. It was just a chef making food in great light.

Partnerships

I have been very lucky in my career to have had two people who have been my partners in my photography since the very beginning. My wife, Soo-Jeong, has been a creative—albeit relatively silent—partner in my business from day one. She has helped me define my style and build out my studio, and she has been instrumental in assembling and curating our prop collection. She has been a constant source of inspiration my entire career. There is nothing like having somebody in your life who pushes you and constantly challenges you to do better.

The other person is my long-time assistant, protégé, and friend, Devon Knight. I have known Devon since he was 10 years old, when I was his teacher and hockey coach. He reached out to me after he had graduated from college with his degree in photography, and we have been together ever since. Devon has since become a fixture on the food video scene and has become very accomplished in his own right, but he remains a loyal creative partner upon whom I lean heavily at times. We have each achieved success with the help and friendship of the other.

I bring up Soo and Dev because I want to touch on the subject of creative partnerships in food photography. Food work is intrinsically complicated, and it can be very daunting to master all aspects of the discipline without trusted creative partners to help make your vision whole. So many of my former students have taken this piece of advice and found people either inside their lives or in the field who have become those kinds of influences on their work. Many other couples have also found extremely fruitful partnerships in this business. Many chef/photographer, photographer/photographer, or photographer/stylist duos have led our industry over the past decade. Many have found their way, through blogging or through traditional photography, to become recognized in our field.

As you move forward and consider how to make a living in this field, I am certain that there will be others, who probably have different strengths than yours, who are also trying to go it alone. Find each other. Through reading bylines and being aware of the people in your area by way of networking, social media, or through agencies that represent similar artists, or by contacting the individual representation of particular artists, you can find like-minded

collaborators to work with. I urge you to find each other and work together regularly. This builds rapport and lends consistency to your work, and it can truly blossom into terrific partnerships.





Even in a small frame, there are ways to create an entire world. With the right elements and lighting, you can bring your audience anywhere in the world.

Finding Work

Finding work in food photography is something that most people find mysteriously elusive. I totally understand this sentiment. Our business is constantly in flux, and although it seems like food photography is everywhere, work in the field can sometimes feel outside our reach.

When you are finally confident enough to put your photography out there as a professional, there are a few things you should keep in mind. First, make sure that your work is represented online in a cohesive way. If I am going to hire you, I want to know what you do best. If your website has seven tabs with seven different styles of photography on them, I am not sure what you do. Decide what you do best and promote that work. This makes it easier for a client to know what they are getting if they hire you. Second, make sure your social media accounts reflect what you do—not who you are. I think Instagram is the best platform for photographers, and you should have a dedicated Instagram account just for your work. Edit, curate, and update your Instagram “portfolio” often. This is the platform that will introduce most people to your work. Most art directors, art buyers, advertising agencies, agents, and other creatives will look for new talent on social media first. Also, the old-fashioned way works too. Send promo pieces to the photo directors or creative directors of magazines, newspapers, websites, agencies, and representation you want to see your work. The yield may be small, but by giving potential clients more things with your name on them, something may eventually stick.

Additionally, if you happen to get the email or phone numbers of people in the industry who could either hire you or potentially mentor you, then I advise you to call them, ask them out for coffee, and make a personal connection. You would be surprised how many of the young, hungry people I have mentored have found me (and a path to potential work) that way. For example, several of the young people who have reached out to me for guidance over the years have ended up assisting me and proving their mettle, and I, in turn, passed off smaller jobs to them with confidence that the client who could not afford me would get quality photography at their budget by hiring one of my assistants. Being aggressive and pounding the pavement still works.

One young woman I am extremely proud to know, Liz Barclay, came to me as, essentially, a student photographer from Georgia with a cobbled-together print portfolio. I found her personal story, which was compelling, and her drive to make it in New York admirable. She was looking more for advice than assisting work, and we spent some time assessing her portfolio. We stayed in touch as she went through some of the paces I prescribed for her in looking for work. She took the hard road of putting in the time both behind the camera and out there meeting people and learning the industry, and she has become a fantastic creative force in our field. We are still friends and now colleagues; we shoot for some of the same publications. I am a great admirer of her and her work. She is one of the many success stories that were born of drive, determination, and, ultimately, talent being recognized.



Social Media for Photographers

If you take a look at the science pages of any newspaper, you can see that social media has become a playground for psychologists and social scientists to have an unvarnished look at the insides of our heads. If you read some of the articles that have been written and apply some common sense to the equation, it becomes evident that we can use these platforms very effectively as business tools. In business, we should strive to stay positive, neutral in politics, and resist the urge to take on all critics, aka trolls. I have found that who I am as a person and who I am as a professional need to be separate on the social channels where I promote my wares as an artist.

The food space in social media has become such a huge, multifaceted community that it literally has a place for everyone. It's pretty hard to stand out these days, but there are clearly some very important reasons to participate. I still think that networking is an

enormous part of the social media landscape, even if using social media has become mostly a passive exercise. In the beginning, we were very actively engaged with our followers and small communities would interact energetically. Now, with the incredible amount of content and the swipe-through nature of most of the apps, it helps to just be there, be seen, and engage as much as you can . . . without oversharing.

Posting frequency matters, and finding the right amount of content to post can be a tricky balance. The less-is-more philosophy has worked well for me. I usually post one to two times a week, but sometimes less. I try to keep my followers wanting more and let my best work shine on social media.

The food photography communities on social media have been very supportive over the years. The positivity and sense of community among those creating, learning, teaching, and everything in between has been rather special. Being engaged in it is a great benefit, and it can be a constant source of inspiration, even passively. I tend to find inspiration both inside and outside of food photography. I like to look at all types of photography, art, architecture, sculpture, and graphic design for ideas. My social feeds are filled with all sorts of creatives doing all sorts of things, and I encourage you to find feeds that speak to you. You should also try to get into food photography-focused online groups and participate in personal or community projects online. This is a great way to build a network and a following, and to sharpen your skills. You may also want to consider entering contests and photo expos. Most of these contests have a food and lifestyle category. I actually judge a few of them myself.

The platforms that are available to us now are also very adept at allowing us to be storytellers beyond the still image. I would strongly encourage you to use the video and story features, the multi-image layout apps, and the post-production apps to push the boundaries of your creativity without having to learn how to shoot a movie camera or master Photoshop or InDesign. The power of the tools inside your phone are remarkable, and I suggest taking advantage of them.

Building a following on social media can be as elusive as finding clients that pay well, but the key I have found to cultivating your following is to post good content and stay engaged. If you have the ability to consolidate and get your followers to gather in one spot, like asking your Facebook and Snapchat followers to come to your Instagram account, that can help. Once you start to gain that following, the potential to earn money and support a lifestyle is pretty

attractive. You are effectively your own brand, and protecting and shaping the perception of that brand is one of your main jobs as an artist in the social media landscape. It is important to show clients how good your work is as well as how well you know how to market and sell that work.

Many advertisers are skipping right over traditional, expensive media for their ads and taking the bold step of working directly with artists for small campaigns, branded content, and interactive campaigns. They often look to social media for talented artists and those considered “influencers,” and if you have a strong following and a well-curated feed, this could be you. I had to make a choice early on in my social media career: take free stuff and monetize my social media presence or stay neutral as a journalist and refuse to do those things. I chose the latter but if I knew what I know now, I would have had a very hard choice. Advertising is driving social media now. Before that was the case, that choice was easy. Not so much anymore.



Always shoot in good light.	Rules	Don't be a purist. This is a visual medium—make it as visual as possible.		Process and enhance your images to make them better.	
	Edit your work/feed carefully. Go back into your feed and take out old work.	to	Vary your angles and subject matter so your feed looks diversified.	Post	Crop images to use the best parts of the shot.
Don't over-post. It's the best way to get people to unfollow you.		Caption correctly so people know what they are looking at.		Give credit to your team (stylists, assistants, etc.).	By

Common Mistakes of Food

Photography on Social Media

The dos and don'ts of shooting food have been a staple on the Internet since the very beginning, but a few of these bear repeating. Never flash your food, try to shoot food in daylight whenever possible, and don't overprocess your food until it does not look like food anymore. I think these were written on the back of the Ten Commandments.

There are a few more things I should bring up. First, in my opinion, it's important to maintain consistency. I think that because people feel the need to post often, they end up posting subpar images to keep up with what they perceive as a very fast pace. This is a mistake on two fronts. One, you should be super selective about the quality of your posts . . . pay attention to quality, not quantity. And, if you overpost, particularly with less-than-consistent images, people will stop looking at your posts.

The other mistake that I see people making is thinking that they cannot make quality images with whatever camera they have. With the high-resolution cameras in all of our phones, this is not true. The camera in your pocket is as good as any other if the light is good and, most importantly, your subject looks great. This leads me to one more thing that is an error in judgment when posting online: featuring ugly food that you think tastes great. You all know what I'm saying. Just because it's decadent and delicious does not mean I want to see it if it looks like a crime scene on a plate. Please don't do that. This has been a public service announcement . . .

There are some little tricks you should know when shooting food, particularly in restaurants, during the day. You should try to get the seats outside or near a window if you want to shoot your food. Plan ahead. Bring a few white and black bounce cards; they don't take up a lot of space in your bag and can really make a difference. Invest in equipment that does well in low light conditions. Certain phones, DSLR, and mirrorless systems advertise that their products handle low light better than others. Look into these items.

One of the other common mistakes is miscalculating the framing on social media, which leads to badly cropped photos when posting

across platforms. Instagram's default is the square, but you can post with original aspect ratios if you take the time to originate the post on Instagram. If you post on Facebook and it jumps to Instagram, though, the image may auto-format for Instagram, and you could end up with a bad crop. Take the time to crop, format, and post your images on each platform you are posting to, so that you get the most out of each post.



Compartmentalize & Cultivate Your Social Media

I was a very early participant in social media, and I have stayed pretty active over the past decade or so. I have learned a few very important lessons along the way. First, I have seen that by using the platform most conducive to our art form (i.e., Instagram) exclusively to display my work, interact with students and fans of my work, and provide a living portfolio to those who would hire me, I have successfully compartmentalized a pretty wild and confusing social media landscape. I use Instagram as a way to connect to my industry on many levels, and I even have my Instagram posts land on the home page of my personal website. This way, I am forced to only post my

best, most relevant work, curate the offerings pretty regularly, and stay away from sharing irrelevant, personal, or subpar work that my clients will have no interest in. Within the Instagram platform, I often choose to use the story feature to highlight things that I want to share with my followers but don't want on my feed. It's a bit of intra-app compartmentalizing.

I have also designated the other social platforms I participate in for very specific uses. Facebook is for staying up to date with personal interactions with my actual (not online) friends and family. I use Twitter for sharing my views about the world and sports, and to keep up with my online friends. There is some overlap between the three platforms I primarily use . . . but for the most part, I have been good at keeping these things separate.



Copyrights

I have noticed that many people who are just starting out, and even some experienced photographers, are watermarking their images on social media and online. This is an acknowledgment that they are trying to protect their intellectual property in a world that has ceased to either care about or respect that idea. I'm not a lawyer, but in my own experience that watermark will do nothing to dissuade potential piracy of your images and is ultimately a distraction for your audience. I want you to care about your intellectual property, but the truth is that people and online entities big and small are going to pirate your images. At least as of this writing, this is a reality we all deal with and is largely unmanageable, but I do have a suggestion. Instead of worrying about piracy, I recommend learning about and understanding copyrights and your rights as an artist. Making sure you get paid to make your imagery and having control of how those images are used by the people you make them for is a far better use of your time and energy, in my experience, than worrying about piracy.

Earlier, I talked about usage fees. This is an elemental concept, as it applies to your rights. When you create an image, whether on your own or by arrangement with someone else, you have an obligation to yourself to understand your rights under copyright and how you can use those rights to your advantage in negotiating fees before, during, and after the creation of the image. A copyright, by definition, is a legal right created by the law of a country that grants the creator of an original work exclusive rights for its use and distribution. Copyright laws vary from country to country, and the specialized lawyers who practice in the copyright field are best equipped to advise you in complicated licensing deals. But from a lay perspective, I think it's important to know at least a bit about what is at stake and what your options are. When I negotiate with a potential client, I always make it clear from the outset that I want to retain the copyright in my images. I also always want to retain the right to use or resell the images for other projects. People often think that when they "retain" copyright that means they automatically have the right to reuse their work at any time, but that is not necessarily true. The language of the contract you sign is important, and you need to think about exactly what you're allowing and whether or not the rights you are granting are "exclusive." What I always want to be sure of is that the person who contracts with me to make images has the right to use those images only as described in the agreement we sign and does not own them outright or have the right to do anything else with them, including reselling them. You give away these rights when you agree to sign a

work-for-hire contract, and this type of arrangement is one you should never enter into without really understanding what it means. At least in the United States, when you agree to work-for-hire contracts, your rights essentially end with the end of the shoot. You can no longer use those images for anything (other than self-promotion, assuming the client will agree to that use and you've put it in the contract) and the client can do pretty much anything they want with them forever.

There have been a number of work-for-hire contracts in history that have ended up looking grossly exploitative, based on the success of the image and the terms on which rights in it were acquired. One of the best known is that of the drawing of the Gerber Baby, a logo drawn by artist Dorothy Hope Smith in 1928. Ms. Smith entered a contest that Gerber held to find a new potential logo for their baby food. Ms. Smith was the winner. She was paid a flat fee of \$300 and received no royalties for her work. The Gerber Baby logo went on to be one of the most famous images of the twentieth century, and stands as one of the greatest examples of how a work-for-hire arrangement can be catastrophic for an artist, at least in terms of compensation that reflects the success of the use to which an image is put. The likelihood that this would happen to anyone today may be smaller because artists tend to be more sophisticated, but it is a great lesson in how artists who are unaware of their rights can miss opportunities for later passive income by forgoing their rights to their work.

I am very aware that work-for-hire arrangements and surrendering copyrights have slowly become the norm in many areas of photography, particularly with this overwhelming need for content across multiple platforms. Many artists don't understand their rights. I am also aware that if you insist on retaining copyright and on narrowing the scope of rights you convey by license, you may not get the work in some cases. In advertising, you may be wise to sign a buyout deal most of the time, because the per-image usage fees above your day rates can be as much as \$10,000 per image. A buyout deal means, essentially, that you are surrendering the rights for any future use or sale of those images to the client. That is a calculated risk that your picture could become the Gerber Baby that I would probably advise you to take.

In editorial, it has been my experience that most clients assume you will retain your copyright and that, after what is often referred to as an "embargo" period, their rights in the image will become nonexclusive. Remember, though, that if your contract refers to an image as a "work made for hire," or if it says that you are conveying

all of your rights including your copyright, those phrases have meaning. Again, I'm not a lawyer and I cannot give you legal advice, but I always try to negotiate this kind of language out of any agreement and settle on a nonexclusive grant of rights with copyright retained by me and usage parameters clearly set in the agreement. In publishing, I have found that clients are generally very willing to allow me to retain copyright with a stated embargo period during which I agree to hold off on reselling or republishing the images for a specific period of time. This kind of arrangement is more affordable for the client and gives them the peace of mind that even though they are not getting an exclusive grant in perpetuity, the images are secure in the market for the time they deem necessary.



We shot a lot of soups for Recipes for Health over the years and we learned some valuable lessons, including how to prop a soup bowl to make the ingredients stay at the top: put a small bowl, turned upside down, inside the bigger bowl to create a platform, and then pour in the soup. The smaller bowl keeps the ingredients from sinking to the bottom of the bowl.

I try to keep all of these things in mind when I negotiate my contracts. Whenever possible, I'm very clear and specific about the fact that I do not want the words "work for hire" to appear anywhere in my contracts, and I also don't want any other language that conveys copyright to the client. One thing I mentioned earlier about self-promotion is important to repeat: even if you do sign an agreement on a work-for-hire basis, you want the right to use the images you have made in the past to promote yourself as an artist. Once an article has run, a book has published, or a campaign has launched, you want to be free to post your work on your sites as a means to promote yourself. Do not let anyone tell you this is not important, or dissuade you from insisting on including it in your contracts where appropriate.

Masks

No, I am not talking about Photoshop, for all you post-production nerds. I am talking about the masks we wear when we work. I am talking about attitude. Creative people, as has been noted throughout history, can be a quirky, temperamental lot, and I am no exception. I have had to learn how to wear a mask when I work to try to hide my passionate belief that I am always right in matters of my work. I had to learn to hide my impatience with some of the people who are hiring me and those whom I hire to work with me. I am intense when I work, as many of you are, but it will behoove you to learn how to keep some of that in check when you are talking to clients and colleagues, and especially to those whom you hire, who are looking to you for leadership. Nothing is worse than being on set with a photographer who is emotional, out of control, and lashing out at his team. The days of the diva photographer are over, and those who have not figured that out yet learn the hard way when the phone stops ringing. Be nice, work hard, and be a leader when you are in charge. Be nice, work hard, and listen when you are not. That's all. The rest you will figure out as you go. A great attitude goes a really long way toward having great clients, crew, and friendships in this business.

Producing

Another aspect of being good at this business is learning to talk the talk and becoming adept at producing your own jobs. Since I started with food styling and propping the jobs in my own space, the learning curve was pretty steep to get to producing anything bigger than an editorial job for which I had complete control of my space and who was in it. Producers and crew speak their own language at times. Knowing the names of all the gear in a studio and some of the shorthand on set is pretty important. Looking at equipment lists at rental houses and Googling the things you don't know is helpful. Also, getting to know an advertising producer and shadowing them on set or volunteering as a PA or assisting a photographer on a big shoot are great ways to learn the lingo. When I began to understand that clients were actually going to be on the set with me and that I could not control every aspect of my shoot, I needed to learn a few things. I had a good friend in the business and stuck to her like glue. I learned as much as I could from her.

One of the first things I needed to do was learn how to hire a crew. I needed other people to do the things that I did by myself if I was going to be in a room with the client and advertising execs. I reached out to other photographers and asked them if they had people they trusted. I had a few friends in advertising who had some recommendations, too, and I looked online for "food stylists in NYC." I learned their rates, I looked at their websites, and I started to hire people I thought were good. Simultaneously, I was training my own stylists to do things the way I wanted them done, and I built an internal team that I could bring to bigger jobs. This ultimately became the way I work about 75 percent of the time.

Crews got bigger as I worked on larger jobs, and sometimes they included people like digital techs (people in charge of the files as they come out of the camera), photo assistants, riggers, set builders (who take care of the sets), and gaffers and grips (who take care of lighting and set gear). It gets big pretty quickly, especially once you get into advertising. Once you get a good crew of people who work well together, you will often hire them over and over.

Renting a kitchen/studio space to shoot in is something you also need to learn about as you grow in the business. There are not many of these around, and they often do not meet the needs of your particular shoot or client, so you will need to familiarize yourself with the ones in your area and know which ones have the lighting, gear, and space you will need for each client. I usually set up visits with local studios, talk to the studio manager, and learn about their rules

and rates—and if they have a freight elevator. This is very, very important.



The “artfully created mess” is a technique that I was able to practice a lot during the seven years and over 2,000 recipes I shot for Recipes for Health. The perfect smudge of jam on the board and spreader was absolutely intentional.



I try to never miss the decoration of a cake. It always reminds me of being a kid, sitting patiently and waiting to lick the spatula. I'm guessing we all feel that way? And that is what food photography is about for me.

Conclusion: Deliverables

I began using the word “deliverables” when I started to work with more corporate clients. In photography, your deliverables are the finished files that you send to your client; but over the years, the word has come to represent something much larger in the grand scheme of what I do every day, both creatively and as a business person.

For example, with clients, my deliverables include more than the tangible product of my work. The term extends to being easy to work with, being responsive to questions and requests, having a good attitude, always being prepared, being able to assemble a good team, being prompt with responses to emails and phone calls, and a whole host of other things. This is how I make sure my clients enjoy working with me. I try to be low maintenance. It’s not about me, and if it becomes about me then I cannot be surprised if that client does not choose to work with me again.

When it comes to my team, my deliverables include first and foremost being a good leader and setting a tone and an example (on and off the set) that make talented people want to work with me again and again. It also includes supporting the group when things go wrong, as they sometimes will, and remembering that I need their help for a successful project. I coached and played team sports for most of my life, and I take that ethos with me into every situation. A good locker room often equals better game play. I coach up my team and help them succeed because their success is tied to mine.

Lastly, I expect high-quality deliverables from myself. I want to be proud of my work. I want the people who hire me to feel good about working with me. I want my team to understand that I care about them. I want the students who come to me to actually learn and take away something valuable. I want to create innovative, beautiful work and have people remember me as somebody who was diligent, kind, and respectful.

In the end, those intangibles are as important as the art.



Index

Page numbers listed correspond to the print edition of this book. You can use your device's search function to locate particular terms in the text.

animatics, 120, 124–25
aperture, 68, 70, 74–75, 77
art and business, 36, 149
art direction, 142
auto setting, 64
AV setting, 64, 75

buyout deal, 175
byline, 136

camera settings, manual, 64–65
case studies, 134–35
cinematic photography, 126
composition, 81–98
copyright, 174–77
 embargo period, 175–77
 exclusive use, 174
 self-promotion, 177
 understanding your rights, 174
count & click method, 74–75

defining yourself, 136
deliverables, 182

finding work, 163–65
Five Rules of the Biz, 130–31
flash, camera-mounted, 40
food preparation, 140–42
food styling, 82–83, 84–88: tool kit, 88
framing, 90–95, 98

gear, 64–65, 76–77, 88

intellectual property, 174–77

ISO, 66, 70, 74–75

Kelvin scale, 31

lighting: bouncing, 45

- brands of, 102

- flash, 40

- direct, 56

- filtering, 40

- LED steady, 102

- macro photography, 36

- principles of, 29

- shaping, 46–47

- softening, 36–45

- style, 55–57

- source, 31–32

- sun, 31, 40–41

- temperature, 31–32, 45, 72

- white balance, 72

luck vs. expertise (“the blind squirrel”), 132–35

manual camera settings, 64–65

masks, 177

maximum coverage, 98

motion, 126–27

partnerships, 160

pricing, 156–57

producing, 178–79

push and pull, 126

Rules to Post By, 168–69

Rules to Style By, 82–83

shopping for ingredients, 140

shutter speed, 70, 74–75

social media, 136, 165–74

- common mistakes, 170–71

- compartmentalize & cultivate, 172

storytelling, 15, 107–27

studio space, 102, 179

table geometry, 96–98

teaching, right-brain, left-brain, 97

The 10 Questions, 151–55

usage fees, 174–75

visual narrative, 109–11

- multiple image narrative, 116–19

- photo essay narratives, 120–23

- single image narrative, 112–15

watermarking, 174

white balance, 72

work-for-hire contracts, 174–77

- Gerber Baby, 175

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